The Midgard Offensive
by NamelesslyNightlock

Summary

As Thanos begins to assemble the Infinity Stones, the universe cries out for its heroes. Tony and Loki have never quite claimed to be *that*, but they know that they’re still going to do a damn fine job of defending their planet regardless. There’s just no way they’re letting an angsty purple eggplant tear them apart and destroy everything they’ve built together. No way in *hell*.

Notes

If you haven’t read the three fics that come before this one, you need to do that first. The characters are all in a different place than they were in the movie (both emotionally and physically. I mean, I don’t even *have* a Vision.) You can count on this going differently to canon.
Maybe it's arrogant and I'm probably biased, but I think I like my opening scene better.

That being said, this will still have Infinity War spoilers.

I'm going to add characters/tags as I go, since I haven't actually written a whole lot of this yet and we all know how great I am at following a plan.
Trial by combat

Chapter Summary

“Oh, there’s certainly no need to fret about that.” Loki’s lips pulled up into a wolfish smile with far too many teeth. “I intend to prove that I am perfectly capable of defeating the Avengers on my own.”

The battle had only just begun when Tony landed on the quiet street in Queens, touching down in front of an average looking apartment building. He drew a lot of attention as he headed in, but his mind was focused on the task at hand and he ignored the smartphones that were shoved in his face. He considered the elevator but there was only the one and it was already halfway up and still rising—he didn’t have time to wait. So he went for the stairwell and was gratified to find that it was the open kind, allowing him to shoot straight to the top floor.

In moments he was walking the hallway, counting doors. The elevator dinged but Tony took no notice, coming to a stop in front of the door he remembered Peter listing as a location of a sleepover. He raised his still gauntleted fist to knock, but before he could—

“Tony?”

“Shit,” Tony cursed, reluctantly turning to the fully uniformed super soldier approaching from the elevator down the hall. “I mean— hi, Cap, what’re you doing here?”

“The same as you, I imagine,” Steve replied, his frown visible even under his cowl. “I was here first. Stand down, Iron Man.”

“No way,” Tony snapped. “I think you’ll find that I was here first—“

“I can’t fly, that’s not fair,” Steve cut in.

Tony sighed, not wanting to argue. Neither of them had the time.

“Together, then?” he asked. Steve nodded, though of course they continued to push and shove to be the one standing in the front of the door when it opened. There was no response until Tony yelled—“If you don’t open the door I’m going to blow it in, just you watch me!”

“You can’t do that,” Steve gasped, and okay he was probably right, but hey, it worked.

“All right, all right!” a voice squeaked from the other side. “Please don’t destroy my apartment, my Mom will kill me!”

“See, he’s just a kid,” Steve growled.

“He’s not just a kid,” Tony snapped back. “It’s in here, I know it!”

The door opened slowly, the safety chain still in place. Tony caught a glimpse of dark hair and brown eyes wide with equal parts awe and fear as the boy realised he had both Iron Man and Captain America at his door.
“Oh god,” the teen groaned. “It’s you. It’s… it’s both of you.”

“Give it up, kid,” said Tony. “I know you’ve got it.”

“I don’t have anything,” the kid said immediately. “My Mom’s not even home, you know, she’s at work. And Mr Iron Man, sir, I think you’ve got the wrong house, anyway. Try 6b, they have some weird stuff over there.”

The kid tried to close the door, but Tony placed his hand in the gap to stop it.

“Son,” Steve said, pushing Tony over to get a better look. “Mr Leeds, isn’t it?”

“Oh,” said Peter’s friend Ned, his eyes widening impossibly further. “You look so much bigger in person.”

Tony, having managed to find the absolutely iconic PSA videos on YouTube some months earlier, couldn’t hold back the short laugh. Steve reddened under his cowl, and Tony took the opportunity to push him out of the way once again.

“Look, we know you have what we’re looking for,” Tony said. “I don’t want to break down your door, but I will.”

“You guys take these things way too seriously,” Ned said.

Tony raised his free hand. “I’m not kidding,” he warned. “Last chance.”

“Okay, okay,” Ned gave in, and Tony pulled his hand away so that Ned could take the safety chain off the door. “I swear, though, you’re mixed up, Mr Stark. Peter didn’t give me anything—“

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t mention Peter at all,” said Tony, turning to Steve. “Did I mention Peter?”

“No,” said Steve good-naturedly, though he didn’t refrain from rolling his eyes. “Look, Ned. Just give me what I’m after, and I’ll give you a signed copy of those limited edition trading cards Peter told me you wanted—“

“Hey, don’t take bribes from him,” Tony cut in. “I’m the one with the funds, here. And I’m the one who got you those Avengers posters, remember?”

“Really,” said Ned, finally opening the door all the way and holding out his hands as if in surrender. “I don’t have any—“

He was interrupted by a crash coming from somewhere in the apartment behind him, the sound heartbreakingly recognisable.

“Crap,” said Tony. “Someone else is here.”

Ned paled but Tony paid him no attention and pushed past him, Steve hot on his heels. They charged through the messy living room and headed straight for the small bedroom on the other side, skidding to a stop in the doorway.

“Oh god,” Ned said again, peeking over Tony’s shoulder.

“Goddamn it,” Tony swore, and the fact that Steve didn’t even call him out on it proved the seriousness of the situation.

Loki was standing amongst the remains of the Lego Death Star he had just smashed on the ground,
his lips curving up into a smile.

“Sorry, dearest,” he said, raising his hand to show them the red and blue flag clasped between his fingers. “You were just too slow.”

Tony flew forward but he was too slow, and Loki was gone before he reached him, leaving only a shimmer of green in his wake. So, like the mature adult Tony often masqueraded as, Tony kicked at the loose grey Legos scattered on the floor and swore up a storm.

“I told Peter this was a bad idea,” Ned groaned. “That Death Star took hours to make, and I’ve already done it twice!”

“Why the hell did you hide it in a Death Star?” Tony asked incredulously. “Seriously? You were just asking for trouble there, kid.”

“I didn’t think anyone would check in there,” Ned said. “Hey, Mr Stark? Does this mean I can still get that signed merchandise? My Mom’s going to be mad at me for this, I mean, it would be the least that you could—“

“I don’t have time, kid,” said Tony, turning around. Then he cursed again as he realised that Steve was already gone, the door swinging softly on its hinges.

“You’re going to pay for this,” Tony told Ned. “Seriously. I’ve lost so much time now, and I didn’t even get the goods!”

“Man, I don’t even care,” Ned said as Tony flew back out into the hall. “I had three Avengers in my room. This is awesome!”

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To be entirely honest, Tony was a bit stuck on who deserved to be blamed for the debacle. Steve was the one who was sad over being separated from his newly found friend but Bruce was the one who suggested cheering him up. Sam had ordered that a team training exercise was in order, and Clint had complained that those things never worked because they just knew each others’ fighting styles too well, and that the sessions were always predictable and boring. Natasha had agreed that they all needed the practice on a larger scale, probably something involving strategy rather than simple hand to hand.

And then, well. Peter had suggested capture the flag, and after that it had been a steamroll of ideas for rules.

Originally, they had planned on two teams. Clint had suggested humans v non-humans, which became amended to enhanced v non-enhanced when Loki had complained that technically, with Thor still missing, he was the only non-human present. Except then Clint complained, because it would be five v four against his side, and then Peter pointed out that hey actually Tony should count as having a superpower since his brain was essentially enhanced when compared to any of the other humans on the team (except, possibly, Bruce).

They thought about trying to separate the teams evenly but it was rather difficult with all their skillsets being entirely different, and it proved impossible to come to any agreement. Natasha suggested drawing straws but Pietro refused to be with either Tony or Loki and Loki was cheating with magic, so in the end, they just decided to go at it individually.

“And that means no teaming up,” Clint insisted. “I do not want to have to face Loki and Stark together.”
“Oh, there's certainly no need to fret about that.” Loki's lips pulled up into a wolfish smile with far too many teeth. “I intend to prove that I am perfectly capable of defeating the Avengers on my own. I don’t need a sidekick.”

“Gee, thanks, sweetheart,” said Tony, catching Loki’s wink with a grin.


That rule was unnecessary, though. All of the Avengers had personalities that would never allow them to back down from a challenge, and never allow sentimentality to get in the way of winning a game. Well, all of them except, perhaps, Bruce.

Bruce had been reluctant to join in at all, but Sam talked him into it with a carefully applied guilt trip and a gesture at Steve’s puppy dog expression, and only an hour after deciding to play they were all standing on the roof of Avengers Tower with Tony handing out various coloured flags.

“So, there will be no using magic to stop people from getting to your flag,” Steve reminded them, his gaze lingering on Loki. “It must be possible to access, and you cannot go back to your flag to protect it after it has been hidden.”

“There’s no fun in that,” Loki groaned, but the rest of the team overruled him.

“Everyone has twenty minutes to hide their flag. Boundary is Manhattan,” Steve added.

“No,” said Tony, pausing after he had handed Clint his purple flag. “That’s too small.”

“Are you kidding?” Clint asked. “We can’t all whizz around—“

“Loki can probably search this whole island in five minutes,” Tony replied, narrowing his eyes at his smirking lover. “We need a wider radius.”

“How about just New York?” Peter suggested. “The city, I mean, not the state. All five boroughs.”

“That’s acceptable,” said Natasha. “We’re all able to get around fast enough.”

“You just want to try out the hover-bikes,” Tony said.

“Of course,” she said, taking her black and red flag from him with a wink. “Whenever better?”

They decided to meet back on the roof at exactly five p.m., giving them two hours for the game on top of the initial twenty minutes. All powers and devices were allowed, as was violence (so long as it wasn’t life threatening) and really, the only stipulation they had was that they try to limit the property damage.

Then, of course, Peter asked the most important question of all.

“What does the winner get?”

“Eternal glory,” Sam deadpanned.

“Eternal bragging rights, more like,” Clint corrected.

“How about the rights to pick the movie for the next three movie nights?” Steve suggested.

“Wow, Cap,” said Tony, his eyes widening. “Make it the next five why don’t you?”
“All right,” Steve said, shrugging. “The next five. How’s that?”

There was a small pause where everyone seemed to hold their breath. Then—

“Ready, set, go!” Clint yelled, launching himself from the top of the building, grappling arrow ready and nocked. “Catch you all later!”

“Too slow, old man!” Pietro’s voice echoed, the speedster himself already long gone. Natasha melted into the shadows with a smirk and Steve, Sam, and Peter threw themselves after Clint, while Loki whipped up a storm of magic that was way more theatrical than necessary and vanished on the spot.

“I’m just going to take the elevator,” Bruce sighed, heading inside.

“See you at the finish line!” Tony gave Bruce a salute and then followed his more eager teammates over the side of the building, his new nanotech encasing him smoothly in his Mark L armour as he fell.

He flew quite obviously away from the Tower and made sure he was seen by Clint, Steve, Sam, and Peter before looping back around, activating his stealth reflection panels and heading into a back entrance in the Tower. By the time he reached his workshop JARVIS let him know that Bruce had already hit the streets, grabbed a cab from right out front and had begun to make his way east.

There was only one place Tony could think to hide his own red and gold flag. And yeah, maybe it would be obvious, but just because people could guess where it was didn’t mean they’d be able to get at it. The only ones with access to Tony’s last-resort safe was himself and his AIs, and since he hadn’t used it in years even Loki didn’t know the code.

Dummy beeped at Tony curiously when he opened the thing up, and Tony smiled at him reassuringly.


Dummy whirred, managing to sound Very Serious despite his lack of proper vocals. Tony narrowed his eyes, and Dummy lifted his claw ever so slightly in a show of arrogance that was unsettlingly familiar. Tony nodded.

“Good boy,” he said, and Dummy preened.

As soon as the flag was in place, Tony headed up and out, intending to be spotted by people with smartphones somewhere far from the Tower. They may be able to guess, but the less suspicions everyone else had, the better.

The moment that JARVIS told Tony that the allotted 20 minutes was up he immediately began flying toward Queens because, well. Peter was clever but no one could ever accuse the kid of being subtle. There was no way he should have supported Tony’s suggestion to spread beyond Manhattan when the tall buildings in the city would have provided him with easy and fast means of transport. Including the other boroughs put Peter at a disadvantage, except for the fact that it included his own stomping ground. There was only one person Peter would entrust his flag to, the one person who Peter would never wish to leave out of such an exciting venture.

Tony was pretty proud of his ability to work out that Peter had left his flag with Ned Leeds, but of course, that little attempt didn’t go entirely in his favour, and he was left flying out the apartment building empty handed.
That was okay though, because there was another flag Tony thought he’d be able to locate.

Peter took his to a place he knew, something Tony had even done himself. Peter had left his flag in Queens. Cap, on the other hand, came from Brooklyn, but Cap also wasn’t stupid enough to put his flag in the middle of his own neighbourhood. There was no JARVIS there to protect it, not even a friend to shove it in a Lego Death Star. Steve wouldn’t have done something so obvious without a fail-safe.

So that was why Tony was zooming over Brooklyn and heading straight for Coney Island when he caught sight of a flutter of green and gold and paused mid flight.

No way.

Tony had expected Loki’s flag to be either somewhere ostentatious, like on top of the Empire State or stuck to Lady Liberty’s nose, or to be somewhere entirely off the grid. He had not expected to find it flying from a completely random rooftop in the middle of Crown Heights.

He was never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, though, so Tony flew down in a swoop, hand reaching out, ready to grab the flag. His face pulled into an expression of triumph as he closed in, already picturing the flash of annoyance in Loki’s eyes when he realised that Tony had managed to find his flag in less than—

Tony’s hand passed through nothing as the flag shimmered and vanished, and Tony careened into the wall on the other side of the rooftop in his shock.

“Fucking cheater,” Tony groaned, getting back to his feet and looking forlornly at the crater in the wall, mentally adding it to the on-going tally of expenses.

“Mr Liesmith has not broken any rules,” JARVIS observed. “No one told him that he could not create decoys.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony sighed, smiling fondly in spite of his annoyance. “He’s always great with the loopholes.” Tony moved to shoot back up to the sky, but then paused. “Wait. Decoys? As in… plural?”

JARVIS didn’t reply, but he didn’t need to. As Tony continued his flight toward the amusement park, he spotted numerous green and gold flags scattered across uncountable rooftops in every direction.

Honestly, Tony didn’t even know why he was surprised.

Deciding to ignore Loki’s ploy for the moment, Tony just kept flying.

When he reached Coney Island, he smiled because he had been right. But then he swore because once again, he wasn’t the first one there. Far from it, in fact.

Natasha was hanging from a rollercoaster stuck at the top of its loop, already reaching for the fluttering blue material taped to the underside. Sam was flying in from the opposite direction, shouting heckling insults that Tony couldn’t quite make out over the jittering of the civilians on the rollercoaster. They didn’t seem too annoyed about having their ride hacked and then hijacked—rather, most of them had their phones out and were taking snaps of the superheroes battling for a blue handkerchief.

Tony swooped in and shoved Sam to the left with a quick repulsor, knowing his wings would be able to pull him out of the fall. But he was too late to stop Natasha and she swung up to grab Steve’s
flag, then used the remaining momentum to land on top of the rollercoaster. She tapped at something on her wrist and the ride began to move again, Natasha perched on the front, holding on with just one hand.

“Show off,” Tony muttered in annoyance, not wanting to go in and grab her when she was moving so fast and in such close proximity to civilians. He landed instead and watched as she flipped down to the ground as soon as she was low enough. Sam landed far less gracefully, stumbling and nearly face planting as his damaged wing caught on the ground.

“Yeah, fuck you, Stark,” Sam grumbled as Tony laughed.

“Aw, come on, Wilson, I thought those wings could catch you out of any kind of fall,” Tony replied, recalling some of Sam’s ridiculous claims as to why Redwing was better than Iron Man.

“Now, now, boys,” said Natasha, holding up her prize. “We all know who the real winner is going to be.”

The arrow cut through the air so fast that by the time the soft twang of the bowstring reached their ears, Tony, Sam, and Natasha were already staring at her empty hand.

“Snap,” said Clint from his spot twenty yards down the way as he pulled the blue, star spangled flag from the end of his grappling arrow.

Sam went to respond but Natasha stopped him, shaking her head and putting a hand on his arm. They and Tony watched, amused, as Bruce stepped up from where he had been hidden behind a hot dog stand and tapped Clint on the shoulder, holding out his hand in a clear request.

Clint shook his head. “As if.”

Bruce frowned and took a step closer, not saying a single word. Tony couldn’t really see what was happening due to the distance, but from the way that Clint paled, he’d put money on Bruce’s eyes turning green.

The flag exchanged hands, Bruce smiled sweetly, and then he ducked into a nearby tent and didn’t come out of the other side.

“Okay, I was not expecting that,” Sam said. “Banner’s got guts.”

“Well, as much as I’d like to hang around discussing that with you, I’ve got six more flags to locate,” Tony said, jetting up into the sky.

“You found two already?” Sam yelled, then frowned as he realised he was the only one left on the fair ground, Clint and Natasha already gone. “Aw, not cool, man!”

Tony was out of ideas at that point, so he turned his nose back to Manhattan. Peter and Steve’s flags were gone, so, to his knowledge, that left another six out there, just as he had told Sam. The only people Tony had yet to see since the beginning were Pietro and Peter, and nearly everyone else had been at Coney, while Steve could have reached anywhere from Queens by now.

He considered his options.

Clint and Natasha were professionals, they wouldn’t have let sentimentality get in the way of their choice. Bruce liked to visit the Met and the library but it was unlikely he’d invite destruction on either of those places. Tony didn’t know Sam well and he knew Pietro even less, so with them he wasn’t even sure where to start.
Out of all of them, Tony probably should have been able to work out where Loki had put his flag. The Trickster had loved attacking Central Park back when he had masqueraded as a villain (still did sometimes to be honest, Tony had regretted the quip about giant squirrels he’d made on his first visit to Asgard) so that was an option, but even then the Park itself was still bloody huge. It wasn’t like Tony could check behind every single tree.

Then, Tony stopped mid flight once again, actually considering hitting himself over the head.

_Idiot._

He’d been coming at the problem from a people point of view. All Steve and Sam’s talk about this being a training exercise and their focus on teamwork had got into his head, and he’d been strategizing by thinking about _them_ when he could have just used his tech brain and hacked into the bloody CCTV cameras that were scattered all over the city.

“JARVIS,” Tony said, his tone half way between disbelieving and triumphant. “Do a city wide search, would you? Where has everyone been in the last hour and a half?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” JARVIS replied.

Tony continued with his flight while JARVIS ran the search, glaring down at the multitudes of fake green and gold flags that covered the city. Maybe one of them was real, sitting in plain sight. It would be something Loki would find funny, the Avengers passing over his real flag because they thought it was fake. But then, Loki’s strategies never left anything to chance— it was more likely that the real flag was hidden away somewhere, entirely out of sight with no likelihood of being picked up by either an Avenger or a random bystander. After all, Tony had already seen several civilians posing with Loki’s illusions, or trying to pick them up as a souvenir of the day the Avengers had a little too much fun. No, Loki would have thought it too risky.

“Sir, I have completed the search,” JARVIS said, interrupting Tony’s musings. “Which Avenger would you like to follow?”

As he considered all the options that sprawled across his HUD, Tony began to grin.

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It was a trial of frustration. Tony had all the information, but every time he managed to find the location of a flag, someone else got there first, sometimes beating him by just moments.

He traced Clint’s movements and found his flag shoved in a bush in Central Park— or rather, Natasha found it, and gave Tony a wink before jumping on her hover-bike and flying off.

So Tony went after her flag next. But Natasha’s flag was in a subway station which was just _mean_, because those steps were _impossible_ to traverse while wearing the suit and Tony had to go down there in just his jeans and his ‘_Save a horse, ride a Norse god_’ tee. And okay, those shirts _had_ been marketed at the Thor fans but how the hell was Tony supposed to resist that? Whatever, the point was that Tony felt oh so very bare pressed in against all those people who were acutely aware by now of what the Avengers were up to (thank you, social media) and who were actively either trying to stop him so whoever they deemed their favourite hero could win, or trying to give him advice which he was pretty sure was incorrect. Besides, even if Natasha _had_ put her flag in the middle of the tracks, there was no way Tony was game enough to go for it, even with JARVIS updating him on the schedule. He’d seen the size of those rats.

Just… no.
It was all rather horrible and Tony was almost glad when he spotted Steve heading in the other direction, tucking a red and black flag into his pocket. Tony may be even further behind, but at least he could head back up into the open sky. Really, Steve had done him a favour, right?

Nah, fuck that. Tony was going **win** this thing.

Pietro’s flag was tucked in a trashcan in the north of the Bronx, almost on the very edge of the boundary they had set. He actually got his hands on that one, but Loki appeared out of nowhere, distracted him with a kiss and took the silver and blue flag right from between Tony’s fingers, vanishing it before Tony had the chance to grab it back.

“Cheater,” Tony said again, this time **definitely** fond. There was something white smeared on Loki’s leather coat but Tony hardly noticed, lost in Loki’s glittering green gaze.

“You love it,” Loki replied, kissing him soundly once more before vanishing himself, and okay, maybe **that** one had been worth losing the flag.

Didn’t mean Tony was just going to roll over though, and he consulted JARVIS once more. The AI, unfortunately, hadn’t been able to find any clues as to where Loki or Bruce had left their flags, but he did have a slight clue on Sam.

With Thor absent the team only had two true fliers, though Natasha, Clint, and Steve were all using their new hover-bikes. But there was a possibility that Sam, used to being one of the few eyes in the sky, had not thought of that. They had all made mistakes in this game, and it was likely that Sam had done the same.

The old adage of ‘no one ever looks up’ was exactly that. **Old.** Tony was willing to bet that the phrase had come to mind when Sam had been thinking of a hiding place for his flag.

JARVIS’ info from the CCTV cameras was fairly useless, but the brilliant AI had also searched through social media. Some tourists had managed to take a snap of Sam soaring over Grand Central, and then only a couple minutes later another tourist had posted a live video of Sam flying past the Flatiron. The Falcon was waving at the people gathered below, his hands clearly empty.

Somewhere in that couple minutes of flying Sam had lost his flag, and Tony had a pretty good idea of where it had to be. There was one rather large building almost exactly between Avengers Tower and the Flatiron, after all.

Honestly, and to think he’d expected Loki to be the one who had left his flag on top of a New York landmark. But then, Sam wasn’t a New Yorker. He probably liked the whole cinematic-vibe of the thing, not as used to living around the iconic skyline as the rest of the team.

As he pulled up and spotted the prize Tony almost didn’t trust the empty scene, but then, the grey flag bordered in a dark red was duct taped to the side of the building, over a thousand feet up. The only way to reach it was from the outside.

Tony waved to the workers inside the window as he pulled the flag from the wall, posing with his two fingered salute and wondering what that Instagram caption would end up as. **Iron Man defaces Empire State with duct tape and grey handkerchief? Who knew.**

It was then that JARVIS alerted Tony that he was almost out of time. It was only a short flight from New York’s **second** most famous building to its first (Avengers’ Tower for the win), and Tony spent most of it irritated that he hadn’t had the chance to look for Loki or Bruce’s flag.

He landed at the same time as Clint and Natasha, both of them climbing off their hover-bikes while
Tony let his suit ripple back into the new arc reactor stuck to his chest, still marvelling at his own genius with the nanotech. Loki was already there, leaning against a wall, a wad of colourful material in his hands. Tony followed his example, held the grey and red flag out in the open, and waved it smugly when Sam stepped out of the elevator with Bruce.

Sam rolled his eyes and moved to stand beside Natasha, who had pulled Clint’s purple flag from a pouch at her waist. Everyone else began to follow the example, and by the time Pietro had joined them, those with flags all held them in their hands.

Peter was the last to arrive, clambering up the side of the Tower, his suit dirty and smelling absolutely god-awful.

“Shit,” said Tony, wrinkling his nose. “Where the hell were you?”

“Pretty much just as you said, actually,” Peter replied. He held out his hand, showing them the green and gold flag scrunched in his palm.

Loki sighed in annoyance.

“No way,” said Clint. “You found the real one? How?”

“He hid it in a sewer,” Peter complained. “Karen gave me the idea.”

“You went into a sewer?” Tony asked, horrified. “In your suit?”

Peter winced. “It can be dry cleaned, right?”

Tony whined.

“Did anyone find Bruce’s?” Natasha asked, glancing around and clearly doing a mental count. When everyone shook their heads, Bruce grinned.

“Awesome,” he said.

“It’s not just Bruce,” Tony said smugly. “I know for a fact that you guys haven’t stolen mine.”

Loki responded by pulling a red and gold flag from the pile in his hands, and Tony gaped.

“JARVIS, you absolute traitor,” Tony said. “You swore you’d keep it safe.”

“I did,” JARVIS replied, his voice eerily coming from a speaker installed somewhere on the rooftop, sounding slightly tinny in the breeze. “Dummy, on the other hand—“

“Dummy likes me more,” Loki said.

“What?” Tony gasped. “No. I specifically told him to keep you out—“

“And he was quite vicious in his attempts,” Loki said, nodding almost proudly. “He wielded his fire extinguisher with ferocity worthy of any warrior. But as soon as I discovered that he was only protecting the flag because he thought he was protecting you, I only had to remind him that I, of course, am always on your side, and he took me straight to your hidden safe. He even opened it for me.”

“That’s supposed to be my most protected safe,” Tony groaned. “Damn it, Dummy. All it takes is a few pats and it’s like nothing’s sacred anymore.”
“Stark,” said Natasha, speaking slowly. “Why does your helper bot have access to your most protected safe?”

“It’s where I used to keep the spare arc reactors, back when I had one stuck in my ribcage,” he admitted, his fingers tapping at the new reactor on his chest. “Dummy saved my life once, by bringing a reactor for me. I wasn’t going to cut him off, just in case.”

“Well, at least he still believed that he was doing the right thing,” Loki laughed, though he gave Tony a soft smile all the same.

“As fun as this is,” said Peter, “Could we continue? I want to know who won!”


Peter was to Steve’s left in the loose circle, so he went next. “I’ve got Loki’s!” he said, waving it about proudly.

When all eyes turned to Clint, he huffed in annoyance. “I’ve got nothing,” he admitted.

“Ditto,” said Sam, glaring at Tony. Hey, no one had said that damaging equipment was against the rules. And anyway, Natasha couldn’t fly either and—

“Clint,” she said, the purple flag held tightly between her fingertips.

Pietro merely shook his head, though he didn’t look at all disappointed.

“Steve,” said Bruce.

“Sam.” Tony showed them his single flag as evidence.

“Peter’s, Pietro’s, and Anthony’s,” said Loki, displaying the flags with a smirk. “I believe I am the only person to have retrieved more than one.”

“So who wins?” Peter asked. “The guy with the most flags or the only person who didn’t lose their own?”

The question almost became moot as a blur shot across the rooftop, ripping flags from the hands of almost everyone before coming to rest in the middle of the circle.

“What?” said Pietro, holding up all eight flags. “You didn’t see that coming?”

“Okay, not cool,” Tony complained.

“I think I win,” Pietro said, tilting his head in mock innocence.

“You still don’t have all the flags,” said Bruce, his lips stretching into a smile even as he let his newly empty hand fall to his side.

“Let’s call it a tie,” Steve groaned. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“I can live with that,” said Bruce, and Pietro shrugged in agreement. “We’ll split fifty-fifty. I’ll take the bragging rights, and Pietro can have the movie choice.”

Pietro frowned and looked like he was about to complain about the split, but then changed his tack and shrugged again instead. “Acceptable,” he said. “But no one may complain about my choices.”
“Oh, great,” Sam groaned. “We’re going to have to sit through movies in Serbian now, aren’t we?”

Natasha tilted her head. “What? You don’t speak Serbian?”

Pietro started to laugh, and Steve shook his head in amusement.

“We can use subtitles,” he said. “And come on, Sam, Pietro got all the flags fair and square.”

“I wouldn’t say it was fair,” Clint muttered. “But okay.”

“You wouldn’t have won anyway,” Loki pointed out.

“Neither would you,” Bruce replied, and then it was Peter’s turn to start giggling as Loki playfully stuck his tongue out at the scientist.

“Yeah, where is your flag, Brucie?” Tony asked curiously. “Literally no one has seen it.”

“You know what?” Bruce said, smiling almost bashfully. “I’m not entirely sure where it is, either.”

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A post by the @AvengersOfficial Twitter account, decorated with #lokicheated and #bannerdeservestowin, asked for New Yorkers to be on the look out for a green and purple flag.

The tweet was trending almost immediately (#capturebannersbanner) and the flag was found twenty minutes later by an NYC yellow cab driver who remembered taking one of the Avengers to Coney Island earlier that afternoon. She discovered the material under one of her back seats amongst spare change, chewing gum, and other things that probably should not be mentioned in polite conversation, and yet it still sold for almost a thousand dollars on eBay the following day.

Gross.

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“I still say you all cheated,” Clint complained later that night as they readied themselves for Pietro’s first movie choice.

“I did not break a single rule,” Loki said haughtily, his voice carrying from where he was collecting mugs of tea and hot cocoa from the kitchen.

“Yeah, and it’s not at all suspicious you assumed that was directed at you,” Clint responded, rolling his eyes.

“No one cheated,” Steve said firmly, walking to the living room with Loki trailing behind, each carrying a try laden with hot drinks.

“It would have been hard to, we hardly had any rules,” Tony pointed out, waiting for Loki to put down the tray – he may have been willing to collect the drinks but his princely arrogance stopped him from going so far as to hand them out – and then grabbed him by the wrist, pulling him down and snuggling into his side. Loki rolled his eyes at Tony’s antics, but wrapped an arm around him and drew him closer just the same.

“You didn’t have to break my wing,” Sam said unhappily. “Just because it’s not a rule doesn’t mean that it’s good sportsmanship.”

“All’s fair in love and war,” Tony said.
“It wasn’t a war!” Sam exclaimed. “It was a goddamn training exercise!”

“One that you guys took way too seriously,” Peter muttered under his breath.

“It was a competition,” said Clint, spreading his hands as if that explained everything. And okay, yeah, maybe it did. “Besides, if anyone cheated, it would be you two.” He pointed between Peter and Tony.

“What?” Peter gasped. “I did not.”

“No one said we couldn’t use our AIs!” Tony complained, catching on. “In fact, I definitely remember agreeing to the rule that said we could use whatever was at our disposal!”

“Exactly,” said Peter, nodding in agreement.

“Then why could I not use my magic to protect my flag?” Loki asked. “Peter would never have been able to—”

“That’s an unfair advantage,” said Sam.

“So is your ability to fly,” Clint snapped. “Don’t see me complaining.”

“Actually,” Sam started, but then Bruce said–

“Hey, come on guys, it’s just a game—”

“Of course you’re saying that,” said Natasha. “You won.”

“Half won,” Pietro reminded them. "Does this mean that I can now be an official member of the team? I did beat all of you."

"Half beat," Clint shot back.

Tony rolled his eyes and was about to cut back in, but their argument was interrupted by a rumble outside, and they all looked up in surprise.

A crack of thunder cut through the sudden silence. Loki was out of his seat in an instant, his eyes trained toward the window as the sky lit up with the flash of lightning. Tony almost fell off the couch at the movement but recovered quickly, looking to Loki with concern.

“Thor?” Tony asked. Loki nodded tensely in reply, his lips pressed in a narrow line.

Thor had left months earlier, called to Asgard to deal with the theft of a golden apple. Tony and Loki had been understandably worried at that point in time, since they were the thieves behind the heist, but the worry had grown into concern when more and more time passed and they received not a word.

Thor landed heavily on the balcony outside, and the lightning in the skies dissipated as he straightened. Tony couldn’t help but stare as JARVIS opened the door, because Thor looked so very different from when Tony had last seen him.

It wasn’t that his outward appearance had changed a whole lot. His hair had a few extra braids in it, maybe, and his beard was a little longer. His armour was the same but for his cloak— Thor’s trademark scarlet had been exchanged for a haunting black, the pure darkness of it almost appearing to cast shadows across his face. But as Thor came inside, Tony saw that they weren’t shadows at all— Thor, who could heal broken bones in hours, had a face that was scattered with bruises. His blue
eyes were pained, his shoulders set harshly, as if all of his bright cheer, usually present in even the
direst of situations, had been torn away.

“Loki,” Thor said, his voice dripping with relief as he strode into the room. He didn’t pause in his
approach and to everyone’s surprise, he opened his arms and wrapped his brother in a tight hug.

Loki remained stiff, his arms at his side, but he didn’t pull away. “Thor?” he asked, the tension in his
voice palpable. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

Thor visibly shuddered, and held his brother tighter.

“Asgard has been attacked,” he said, his broken voice muffled against Loki’s shoulder. “Loki… I am
sorry. Our father is dead.”
“Okay,” Tony said, staring at the glowing corner of the horribly familiar blue cube visible inside the bag. “I think we’re going to need to bring the others back in on this one.”

There was a moment where Loki remained in Thor’s arms, his body stiff and rigid. Tony wondered if he was finally allowing himself some measure of comfort from his brother, but the moment didn’t last long before Loki pulled away, wrenching himself from Thor’s hold.

“Your father, you mean,” Loki spat, turning on his heel and striding across the room and past where Thor had discarded Mjölnir to stare out of the window beside the door to the balcony, which was still ajar from Thor’s entrance. Tony tracked his movements almost reflexively and saw the tension in Loki’s shoulders, the shudders that racked his frame despite his clear attempt to remain in control. “If he was ever my father, he lost the right to call himself so when he attempted to take from me that which I hold most dear.”

“Loki, he’s gone,” Thor said. “Dispense with your hatred, he is dead. Asgard needs us—“

“Asgard.” Loki’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “Asgard always needs us, Thor, and they are always grateful for you, but never once have they thanked me for my assistance. What could possibly cause that to change?”

“Do you not wish to know why?” Thor asked. “To know why our father died?”

Loki’s only response was to slam his hand against the window, the thick, Hulk-proof glass shuddering dangerously.

Tony took that as his cue, standing from the couch and moving quickly towards Loki. He put a hand on the small of his back and frowned as he felt Loki tremble under his touch, his whole body shaking hard enough that Tony could feel it through the coat Loki had yet to remove.

Loki didn’t respond, his eyes staring out the window, the glazed sheen across them making it clear that he wasn’t seeing the city below. Tony stayed quiet and still, not wanting to press or do anything unwelcome but needing Loki to know that he didn’t stand alone.

“Maybe we should go,” Bruce suggested, and Steve nodded in agreement, already moving to stand. Tony hesitated at first, then shifted as if to follow, but Loki’s fingers curled around his wrist.

“No,” Loki said quietly, his gaze pulling away from the window. “Stay.”

Tony nodded, and placed his free hand back on Loki’s waist, offering the comfort that the god clearly needed.

Thor didn’t seem to get that Loki had only been speaking to one person in the room. “Yes, stay,” he said, addressing the team as a whole. “This will affect you as well, for Thanos will be on his way here, soon.”
That caught Loki’s attention, his gaze snapping away from Tony to bore into his brother.

“What?” he said, his voice losing all harshness to make way for cold, unfettered fear.

Thor looked back to Loki, his eyes once more full of sorrow. “Yes, brother,” he said. “It was the Mad Titan. He attacked our home, searching for the Stones.”

“And Asgard had two,” Loki said hoarsely. “I all but handed them both over, and now—”

“Asgard has two,” said Thor. Loki’s eyes narrowed slightly, but Thor didn’t elaborate. “Thanos attacked us with the Power Stone,” he said instead.

“Xandar is lost, then,” Loki muttered, his fingers on Tony’s wrist tightening slightly. “They would not have stood a chance.”

“No,” Thor agreed, shaking his head.

Tony glanced between the two gods, his brow creasing in a frown. “What’s Xandar?” he asked.

“It is a planet,” Thor replied. “Its citadel was the capital of the Nova Empire, the stronghold of the Nova Corps. They procured the Power Stone several years ago and vowed to keep it safe, but they could not stand against Thanos.” He glanced down sadly. “Thanos destroyed them, and killed so many that near on half of the population perished. Word reached Asgard and we knew that we would be next—Thanos could not resist the allure of two Stones in one place.”

“Not even Asgard could withstand the Power Stone,” Loki said. “Are they gone, too, brother? I know what Thanos desires, I know what he plans to do. Has Asgard also been slaughtered?”

“No,” said Thor. “Father saved us.”

Loki snorted. “Of course he did. And then he died in the process, leaving us to sort out the rest of the mess, as always.” He released his hold on Tony and turned back to his brother, an eyebrow raised, his expression the picture of nonchalance. But Tony could see the small tremors in his hands and shifted closer, still offering Loki support, should he want it.

“He saved us,” Thor insisted. “When Odin saw the Einherjar begin to fall, he took the Tesseract and he wielded its power with his own hands. When that proved not enough, he used the Mind Stone as well.”

“No,” Loki snapped. “He couldn’t have. That much power, to hold two Stones at once without the aid of the gauntlet— that would have killed—” Loki cut himself off, his breaths coming in heavy pants, his eyes wide and wild. “No,” he said again. “Odin would not have done that, he is too selfish.”

“Father tore himself apart fighting the Mad Titan,” Thor said, spreading his palms at his side, almost pleading. “He used the Space Stone to move Thanos and his army away from the citadel and used the Mind Stone to hide it from their eyes. Then he fell, torn apart by the very power that he had wielded.”

Loki’s hands were tight fists at his side, the muscles in his neck and shoulders so taut that Tony could see the tendons bulge as he grit his teeth together.

“And then?” Loki asked, the words hissing past his teeth angrily. “Thanos would not have left so easily.”
Thor averted his eyes, and Loki stepped forward harshly.

“Tell me,” Loki snarled, his lips twisting into an awful grimace. “What is it that you do not want me to know? Is it so bad, brother? Do you think I will snap upon hearing it?”

“Perhaps,” Thor admitted, and Loki actually took a step back in surprise at the clearly honest answer.

“Yeah, let’s go, guys,” said Sam, and Tony flinched. His focus had been so drawn by Loki and Thor that he had all but forgotten that the rest of the team were still in the room. He glanced over to them now and saw that Sam was ushering them all out, Steve at the forefront and Natasha bringing up the rear. Peter was staring at Loki mournfully, and had to be tapped on the shoulder by Clint before he, too, followed the others into the elevator.

Tony moved as well, and when Loki’s head turned sharply at the movement Tony merely gestured to the newly vacated couch.

“Come on, sit with me,” he said, perching on the end of the furniture and patting the space beside him.

Loki appeared to be reluctant but Thor walked over immediately, the tension bleeding from his shoulders as he slumped into an armchair on Tony’s left. He put his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, rubbing at his face in distress. His posture was open and vulnerable, and Loki seemed to deflate at the sight. He too headed for the couch, sitting beside Tony with his back straight, his hands clasped in his lap.

“Okay,” said Tony, keeping a worried eye on Thor even as he reached out to grasp one of Loki’s hands to hold between his own. “Have at it, Thor. What happened after Odin sent Thanos out of Asgard?”

Thor sighed, and looked back up to them mournfully. “Thanos had already killed countless Asgardians,” he said. “Many civilians, a third of the Einherjar, and most of the warriors, including my friends Hogun and Volstagg.” Loki’s fingers curled into Tony’s, but he otherwise remained unmoved by the news. “When the Allfather fell, we felt like we had little hope. Heimdall assured us that Thanos could not see the city through Odin’s mind trick, but he still knew where it was, he had not been entirely disorientated. He was coming back, and there would be little we could do to stop him.”

“But you did, right?” Tony asked when Thor paused, sensing that Loki would not speak. “You said Thanos didn’t get the Stones.”

“We didn’t,” Thor replied. “My father’s death…” Thor’s fists clenched until his knuckles were white, and his teeth gritted together tightly. Tony was already rubbing soothing circles into the back of Loki’s hand and he didn’t know how he could comfort his friend as well. He didn’t have the words to deal with something like this. But Thor seemed to find his strength on his own, and his next words were spoken with calm clarity. “My father’s death brought forth something that none of us thought possible. Someone that we didn’t expect.”

“Someone?” Loki asked. “Who?”

“Our sister,” Thor said, catching Loki’s eyes as they widened in shock. “I know, I didn’t believe it either, until Heimdall confirmed it. Hela, the goddess of death.”

Hey, I thought the death goddess was supposed to be Loki’s daughter ran through Tony’s mind, but even with his lack of brain-to-mouth-filter he could recognise that it wasn’t the time to say something
Loki was as taut as a bowstring, and Tony flinched himself as the bones in his hand ground together with the pressure Loki was applying to them as he held on tight. Tony's flinch seemed to bring him back into himself, though, and Loki instead ran his fingers smoothly over the contours of Tony's hand, cooling magic soothing the ache immediately in silent apology.

"It shouldn't surprise me," Loki eventually said, "that Odin had another child, hidden away like something to be ashamed of."

"I don't know the full story," Thor admitted, "but Hela seemed to be a real piece of work. She stated that the throne was hers as Odin's eldest child. She claimed the title from me and I let her, because I didn't know what to do. I didn't… I wasn't worthy."

"Bullshit," Tony called. "You are so worthy, Thor, god, come on."

"I couldn't defeat Thanos," Thor said, shaking his head.

"So Hela rules Asgard now?" Loki asked. "That's what you thought I would react to? That another of your siblings sits upon the throne, while I remain in Midgard?"

"No," said Thor. "To be honest, I thought you would be upset that father hid more secrets from us."

"There are so many secrets that I am past caring about them," Loki retorted, though the anguish that cut through his words undermined their meaning. "Answer my first question."

Thor shook his head. "Hela was strong, and she was fierce. She said that in the old days, she rode at Odin's side and helped him conquer worlds. She loved Asgard and its power above all else, and when she saw that it was threatened, she raised an army of the dead to defend it." Thor glanced down to his knees again. "I should have stopped her. She was violent and power hungry, and she acted rashly. But I do not think that I could have— I doubt anyone could have stopped her."

"What did she do?" Tony asked.

"Hela led Asgard's armies and her own force of cadavers against Thanos, and she almost managed to kill him," Thor told them. "But she was arrogant, and she did not take anything else to help her. Perhaps, with the Tesseract, she might have succeeded, but alone… she wounded Thanos grievously, but he had the Power Stone, and no army of the dead could ever stand against that."

"So she's dead, too," Loki said, almost deadpan, though Tony could read pain in his voice.

"She drove Thanos away, but lost her life in the process," Thor groaned, closing his eyes and digging his fingers into the leather on his knees. "I found out that I have sister, and then she died almost immediately. The Norns have cursed me."

"They've been most unkind to us all," Loki said, his own voice gratingly harsh and self-deprecating. And Tony hated that, because he loved Loki and he loved Thor, albeit in different ways, and he hated seeing them in such pain. So he fought back against it in the only way he knew how.

"All this talk about Norns is making it seem like you guys are blaming fate, here," said Tony, causing both of the gods to turn their gaze on him. "I mean, come on. Fuck fate. You're on Midgard now, and us Earthlings like to make our own way in life."

"You're right," said Thor, steeling himself. "I came here with the intention of stepping up and protecting my home. Thanos still will not be able to see it, but he knows where we sit, and he knows
that we are weakened.”

“If all this is true,” said Loki, “then you are here to warn us.”

“Yes,” Thor agreed. “You’ve met Thanos before. You know what he will do.”

Fingers clasped around Tony’s tightened for a moment, before Loki raised his free hand and touched it to Tony’s cheek, this thumb tracing the edge of his goatee.

“We cannot let that happen,” Loki said, his eyes boring into Tony’s with determination even as he addressed Thor. “I will not allow that to happen.”

“Then I was right in coming here,” Thor resolved. Tony heard the rustling of fabric, and by the time he had turned Thor was holding out a small leather bag. It was round, made of old, well-worn brown leather with a drawstring holding it closed. It looked like it could maybe hold a few coins but not much else, though the runes around the top suggested there was something magical about it.

“I haven’t seen that in centuries,” Loki said bemusedly, leaning around Tony to get a better look. “Did you steal it from my old rooms?”

“Like you said, you haven’t used it in an age,” Thor replied. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. You can have it back, along with what’s inside it.”

Loki frowned, and Tony watched first in amazement and then in disbelief as Thor reached into the small bag and pulled out a familiar metal box too large to have feasibly fit inside. With the magical property of the bag revealed (and honestly, there was a perfect Mary Poppins joke to be made somewhere) Tony’s interest was immediately diverted to the small box which he knew to be constructed with a gold-titanium alloy. He knew, because he had made it, had given it to Loki when the god had wanted to keep the Mind Stone when the Avengers had asked for his sceptre after the Ultron debacle.

“Why did you bring that here?” Loki asked, his eyes blazing.

“I brought it for you,” Thor replied. “You know how to use it, and you are powerful enough to keep it from Thanos.”

“I don’t want it,” Loki snapped, though Tony noticed that his gaze had not left the golden box.

“There is no one else that I would task with protecting it,” Thor said. “I trust you, Loki.”

Loki swallowed hard, but Thor’s words seemed to mean more to him than anything else he had said so far, and it was only a moment before Loki reached out slowly, hesitantly, and took the box. He cradled it between his hands like it was a bomb about to go off—which, really, it sort of was—before tucking it away into nothing.

“I remember how proud you were when you first learned to do that,” Thor said with a sad smile, before raising the leather bag slightly. “Though I also remember that I was upset, because my gift to you was no longer needed.”

“You accused me of showing off,” Loki replied. “I only learned to manipulate pocket dimensions because I used the bag so often that I knew the usefulness of them, but I knew that it would be more efficient to not have to carry it around with me.”

“We never were good at talking to each other,” Thor admitted.
“On that note,” said Loki, speaking warily as if he already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes, there is.” Thor almost looked sheepish as he carefully peeled back the edges of the leather bag, revealing the other item inside.

Loki’s teeth clacked together audibly, and Tony groaned aloud.

“Ohay,” Tony said, staring at the glowing corner of the horribly familiar blue cube visible inside the bag. “I think we’re going to need to bring the others back in on this one.”

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Steve, understandably, was a little upset that Thor had brought the artefact directly responsible for near on all the pain in his life back to Earth, but he put on a brave face. The others were wary, but did not have quite such a personal link to thing.

Clint was more upset about the Mind Stone. Pietro likely would have shared his views but he, along with Peter, was noticeably absent. It was late enough that they had probably both simply gone home, though, and the thought almost dragged a smile from Tony’s lips. He knew that Peter would not have gone quietly, and that Steve (or, probably, Sam) had threatened to call Aunt May if he didn’t go home to sleep. It was a school night, after all.

None of the rest of the team managed to get much of a word in, though, because by the time they had received JARVIS’ request to return to the common floor and had stepped out of the elevator, Loki and Thor were, somewhat unsurprisingly, engaged in another argument.

“Why did you even bring the Stones here if it was not for them to be used?” Loki asked, still seated on the couch but leaning forward over Tony to glare harshly at Thor.

“This isn’t what I meant,” Thor replied, but Loki wasn’t having it.

“Stop fretting, I’m no longer a child. You don’t need to worry—“

“I know that—“

“Then why—“

“Brother, you are not strong enough,” Thor pleaded. “Father could not wield both Stones at once without it tearing him apart—“

“I will be,” Loki replied. “Thor, I can be stronger than him. I am not weak, I can do this—“

“Loki, there’s no need for this,” Thor replied. “You do not need—“

“No,” Loki said harshly. “I have to.”

“Why?” Tony asked. “A moment ago you didn’t even want one of these things!”

“That was before I realised what Thor wanted to do with the other one,” Loki shot back.

“Loki,” Tony said, shaking his head. “Why don’t you let us help? Why does everything have to fall on you?”

“Because out of everyone in the Nine Realms,” Loki said, his voice suddenly low and broken. “Out of everyone in the known universe, the only other person I would trust with the power of an Infinity
Stone is you.”

Tony blinked, but he filed that fucking bombshell away for when they weren’t dealing with something that was quite literally life and death.

“What don’t you just give it to me then?” Tony asked. “Seriously, I can handle it, you don’t need to kill yourself trying to hold onto both.”

“I can’t,” Loki said, shaking his head. “Midgard already has another Stone, and if you take this one, you become one of his targets. I can’t let that happen.”

“So why can’t Thor keep it?” Tony snapped. “Or am I more expendable than him?”

“No,” Loki said immediately. “That’s not– Thor is different. He has his own power, yes, but he has never experienced something quite on this scale.”

“And you think I have?” Tony asked incredulously. “Loki, you’ve had two Infinity Stones in the past, the two that you’ve got now, in fact. You and Thor have both seen a third in action. I haven’t. The closest I ever got to one was when you tried to take over my mind right here in this tower.”

“You humans had the Tesseract for decades,” Loki started, but Tony cut him off with a shake of his head.

“You really think SHIELD let me within a mile of that thing?” Tony said. “I didn’t even know they had it, and it was my father who dredged it out of the ocean looking for him.” Tony pointed to Steve, then was hit with a brainwave, his eyes widening. “For god’s sake, why don’t you give it to Steve?”

“I won’t take it,” Steve said immediately. “I’m sorry, but I— after all that it’s done, I can’t.” There was something in the crease to Steve’s brow and the pain in his eyes that told Tony that he would. It would hurt him, but if the world needed him to, Steve would be willing to put his past to the side and deal with the bloody thing.

Loki was shaking his head, anyway, but before he could respond Steve was talking again.

“Tony,” he said in that low, deep voice that just gushed with honour and goodness. “One of the wisest men I ever knew once told me that power should be granted to a little man. Because while a big man has known strength all his life, a smaller man knows to respect it.”

“And you’re saying I don’t deserve the Stone because I’ve been a big shot since I built my first circuit board at four years old?” Tony asked, bitterness seeping into his words despite the fact that he agreed with the sentiment. “Well, you’re not wrong, and you’re not the first to—“

“No,” said Steve, shaking his head. “You see, at the time, the words made sense. But I like to think that I have grown up a bit since then, and now I know that the size of a person’s heart has absolutely nothing to do with where they came from, and absolutely everything to do with who they are inside. You’ve known power your whole life Tony, and you’ve grown and learned how to deal with it. You made mistakes in the past, but now you’re one of the greatest men I’ve ever known, and one of the most powerful to boot. The two are not exclusive, and I think Loki knows that.”

Tony couldn’t stop his gaze from flickering over to where Loki was watching Steve with surprise etched across his face.

“I can see why he thinks you’re the safest option for the Tesseract, Tony,” Steve finished, and then he turned to Loki himself. “And you don’t have to worry. He might become a target, but he isn’t going to stand alone.”
The rest of their team gave their agreement, and Tony felt his own expression soften. It was nice, having a proper team.

"Of course not," Loki said, leaning into Tony’s side and wrapping an arm around his waist. "I will be here."

Tony glanced to Steve one last time, and when he nodded, Tony held his hand out to Thor.

"All right, Point Break," he said, his voice steady and sure. "Lay it on me."

Tony wasn’t sure what he expected, but he had definitely thought it would be slightly more dramatic than Thor pulling the string on the bag tightly closed and then simply dropping it into Tony’s outstretched palm. The leather was smooth and slightly warm, but it weighed hardly a thing and it easily fit into the pocket of Tony’s jeans.

"I’m sorry," said Loki, pressing his lips to Tony’s forehead. "For asking this of you."

"You didn’t," Tony replied. "And that doesn’t matter, anyway. We need to keep this from Thanos, and if this is the best way—"

"It is," Loki said. "And you need not worry, Anthony. With the two of us, two Infinity Stones, and the rest of the Avengers, Thanos would make a grave mistake in coming here."

Tony smiled and leaned in for a kiss, but paused when he saw the crease forming on Loki’s brow.

"What is it?" Tony asked, following Loki’s gaze to the god on his left.

"Thor?" Loki prompted, his tone laced with warning.

"Loki," said Thor, his blue eyes pleading. "You’re not going to like this, but… please. I need your help."

"I have already given it," Loki said, wary.

Thor pressed his lips together in thought before admitting— "Something more than that."

Loki’s eyes narrowed. "You have already given me one Infinity Stone, Thor, and you have burdened Anthony with another. What is it that you think requires more asking than that?"

Thor seemed to steel himself for a moment. "I need you to come with me. To Asgard."

Tony felt Loki tense, his whole body going rigid once again. But… Tony didn’t think that was too much to ask. Unless—

"They’re not still trying to arrest us are they?" Tony asked, and he heard someone (possibly multiple someones) snort. "Because, I mean, that would put a bit of a damper on the whole thing."

"Thor is the king of Asgard now," Loki responded before his brother could. "If he is asking for help, he will be able to exchange our exoneration for it."

"Of course," Thor said immediately. "Brother, even if Æðunn had not been among those slain in the attack, I would have made sure that—"

"Æðunn is dead?" Tony gasped. "But—"

"Freyja has already begun restoring her garden," Thor said. "But yes, she is among the fallen. May
she find glory in the halls of Valhalla.”

“Oh my god,” Tony muttered. “This is... it almost seems surreal, Íðunn, Odin… I’m so sorry, I know it’s nothing compared to what it’s like for you but to think that they’re gone when they’ve been in our legends for centuries—”

“As have we,” Loki cut in. “We are not truly immortal, Anthony.”

Tony looked down to where his fingers were entwined with Loki’s, doing his best to keep his nightmares from encroaching. He knew all too well just how easily Loki’s long life could be cut short.

“Thanos is going to pay for what he did,” Thor said harshly. “He has already suffered, but that he managed to get away alive is a mistake that I shall not make again.”

“And we’ll help you with that,” Tony said firmly. “Won’t we, Loki?” When Tony received no response, he glanced up to see that Loki was still watching Thor with narrowed eyes.

“I won’t,” he said, rising from the couch to stand over Thor.

“You’re our best hope,” Thor tried, standing himself and holding out an inviting hand. “If you would just—”

“No,” Loki snarled, shoving Thor away, hard. “I will not.”

Thor stumbled and fell back into the chair, clearly surprised by the force Loki had employed.

“Loki, you’re being unreasonable,” Thor tried, and, well, Tony could have told him that was a bad idea.

Loki’s eyes blazed green, but instead of attacking like Tony half feared he would, he turned from his brother and stalked out of the room, his whole body shaking once again.

“Oookay,” said Clint. “That was dramatic.”

Tony glared over at the team who were still watching in quiet interest before rising to follow. But he was stopped when Thor called out.

“Please, Tony,” said Thor. “I need his help. All of the Nine need his help.”

“I don’t think I can make him go if he doesn’t want to, Thor,” said Tony. What he didn’t say was that he wasn’t sure if he wanted to even try. It was clear that Thor was earnest, that Loki really was needed elsewhere— but Tony also knew that the Earth was going to need them more than ever if Thanos decided that it was his next target. Maybe it was tactically sound to head Thanos off early and nip the problem in the bud, but every part of Tony’s body and mind was screaming for him to stay on Earth and begin preparations to protect his own home before all else.

“Please,” Thor said again. “Please, try.”

Despite his misgivings, Tony gave him a nod.

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Loki was staring out at the city again, his hand pressed up against the window in their bedroom, his face so close to the glass that his cool breath left a mist across the glossy surface.
“I’ll admit to being a bit lost,” said Tony, stepping closer but not touching. “Thor didn’t exactly ask anything alarming. Certainly no more than handing over Infinity Stones.” He touched the stretched denim on his right hip, still disbelieving of the fact that he had one of the six most powerful objects in the universe in his pocket.

“He wants me to go to Asgard,” Loki said without looking away from the window.

“Yeah, I got that,” Tony replied. “But what—“

“He wants *me* to go,” Loki cut in, finally turning and cupping his hands around Tony’s cheeks, cradling his face with a gentle affection that was in complete contrast to the fire in his eyes. “Me, not you.”


Loki laughed, a harsh, bitter thing that sliced through the air as cleanly as the jagged edge of a broken dagger. “Don’t you see?” he asked. “Thor is right, it is the best way.”

“No,” Tony said again. He felt somewhat like his intentions and their roles in the argument had been entirely subverted by this smallest change in detail, but he pressed forward just the same. “If Thanos is out there, I’m not letting you leave my sight. I’m not going to let you run off with Thor to face him without me by your side, I can’t, I—“

“Shh,” said Loki, his gaze softening and his arms lowering to wrap around Tony’s shoulders instead, drawing him into a tight embrace. “I will be all right, Thanos will not get close enough to hurt me.”

“You can’t promise me that,” Tony accused, and when Loki’s only response was to press his face into Tony’s hair, Tony couldn’t help the shudder that scrambled up his spine.

“You must stay here,” Loki said instead, his breath gusting over Tony’s scalp and rustling through his hair. “You’re needed, here. You are Midgard’s best defender, and if you leave now they will be woefully unprepared when the time comes to fight.”

“So let Steve run the show,” Tony cut in. “God, I feel like I’ve praised him so much today, but come on— he’s Captain America, he can handle planning for an invasion.”

“He is a good battlefield commander,” Loki agreed, “But you are the brains in the Avengers, and you know that. The Captain will not be able to rally the rest of this planet as you could, and he could not bring together all the people required for its defence. You are needed here.”

Tony pressed his forehead to Loki’s steady shoulder, not wanting to admit that he could hear the truth in Loki’s words. Honestly, he’d already known, he’d known for years, long before Ultron and way back to the first invasion that the world needed him. Maybe he was arrogant to think it, but it was true that he could help save them all. But that didn’t mean that he could accept what that meant.

“So stay with me,” Tony pleaded, despite knowing it wasn’t going to work, that he almost didn’t want it to work. Almost.

“I swore that I wouldn’t leave you,” Loki said. “And I will not. I have my phone, and I will come back to you, I swear it.”

“So you’re going, then?” Tony asked, his voice cracking as he pulled away far enough to look into Loki’s green eyes. “Just like that?”

Loki leaned down to draw him into a deep, aching kiss, and Tony could taste the promise that
danced on the tip of Loki’s tongue.

“There is no ‘just like that,’” Loki said as he pulled away, his words whispered against Tony’s lips. “I do not wish to be parted from you.”

“But it has to be done,” Tony agreed brokenly. “Okay… But you’re not going right now.”

“No,” said Loki. “I’m certain that Thor requires rest. We will not be leaving until at least the morning.”

“I will relay that information to Mr Odinson, Sirs,” said JARVIS.

Loki’s lips curved into a gentle smile, though his eyes didn’t leave Tony’s. “Thank you, my friend. Know that I shall miss you, as well.”

“And I shall be awaiting your return, Mr Liesmith,” JARVIS replied.

“I don’t want you to go,” Tony said. “But I know why you need to, and I know that I have to stay. I’m not going to like it, but… We can do this.”

“We can,” Loki agreed, his lips turning up in a smile. “Thanos isn’t going to stand a chance.”

“Fuck Thanos.” Tony ran his hands up Loki’s side, resting one on the back of his neck and sliding the other back down to curl around Loki’s waist. His smile sweetened as he drew the god closer, and he leaned back in to ghost his lips over Loki’s cheek. “I don’t want to think about him right now.”

Loki spelled out his agreement with the press of his lips and the caressing touches of his hands, kissing with desperate fervor that echoed Tony’s need for closeness. Time apart was imminent and inevitable, but it wasn’t happening yet. For now, they had a few sweet moments with which to remind each other of just what they had to cherish, of what they would have the privilege to miss… and of exactly what they had to lose.
Such sweet sorrow

Chapter Summary

“What are you going to do with it?” Bruce asked, looking away from the Stone to shoot a wary glance in Tony’s direction. “You’re not going to experiment on it, are you?”

“Bruce, who do you take me for?” Tony gasped, jokingly placing a hand over his heart. “I’m a scientist, of course I’m going to do experiments on it.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning they found the others in the kitchen, sitting at the counter with uneaten breakfasts in front of them. Steve was at the stove, flipping pancakes and turning bacon with enough efficiency to feed a small army, despite the fact that nothing of the mountain of food he had already cooked had been consumed. Even Thor’s meal remained mostly untouched, save for the way that his egg was spread all over the plate like a massacre had taken place with a particularly bloodthirsty fork.

“Loki was always going to be my advisor,” Thor was saying to his deconstructed breakfast, the others glancing intermittently between him and the captivating show Steve was putting on. “We used to play at it a lot as children, and it quickly became our reality. We knew I would become king, and we took it for granted that when I did, he would be standing by my side, helping me.”

“And then all that went to shit, I guess,” Clint said, snorting down into his untouched pancakes.

“No,” Thor said firmly. “I am king now, and while I am more ready than I was before, I know that he will not forsake me. Loki knows that I will need his help.”

“You wouldn’t last half a day on Asgard’s throne alone, brother,” Loki said, announcing their presence to the others. “Believe me, it is not a comfortable place to sit.”

Thor looked up, a hesitant smile on his lips. “You would know better than I.”

“So, that’s it then? Off to Asgard you go, with Loki to be your advisor?” Tony asked as he slid into a seat beside Natasha, proud of his ability to keep his voice level. Loki didn’t sit, but stood close behind him, his hand resting on the small of Tony’s back.

“At first,” Thor said, laying down his egg-spattered utensil. “The city’s defences need to be strengthened, and Loki’s skill with the Mind Stone will be invaluable, not to mention the experience he has had in such matters.”

“They hardly listened to me when they thought I was Odin,” Loki grumbled. “Why would things be different now?”

“They’ve been through a lot since then,” Thor said. “You would be surprised of what Asgard is willing to do.”

“You said Asgard ‘first’,” Natasha observed, leaning forward curiously. “Where after that?”
“Knowhere,” said Thor.

“What?” said Clint, frowning. “So you’re just going to stay in Asgard?”

“No, Knowhere,” said Loki, raising his brows in surprise. “Spelt with a K. It’s a place.” He turned to Thor. “You want to secure the Aether?”

“Yes,” Thor said. “If Thanos knew the location of the Power Stone, then it is likely he knows this as well. He has shown his hand now, he will not hold back from further destruction. We must act first.”

“Whoa, whoa,” said Tony, raising his hands in the universal show of confused worry. “I know that name. That’s another Infinity Stone, isn’t it? The one that nearly killed Jane Foster?”

“That is reckless,” Loki said, ignoring Tony but for the soft press of fingertips against his spine. “We don’t have a gauntlet, and we already have two of the Stones—“

“One more and we will have half of them,” Thor replied, “and you know that there is another Infinity Stone on Midgard.” Thor turned to address the Avengers as a whole. “It is a fact known by few that the Time Stone has been in this Realm for centuries. While we are gone, you must find it and keep it safe.”

“I admit, I kind of agree with Loki, here,” said Clint. “If Thanos is searching for these things, then surely finding them and bringing them to one place is doing his job for him?”

“That is a good point,” Steve said, frowning seriously even as he flipped another pancake perfectly on top of the impossibly high stack. (When it fell, Tony would laugh. He was preparing his cackle already.) “If we collect the Stones, all Thanos will need to do is defeat us on a single front.”

“No, I see what Thor’s getting at,” said Tony, pulling his gaze from the entertainment just waiting to happen and focusing on the more serious issue. “We know these Stones can be tracked, because Bruce and I have done it before.”

“We tracked the Tesseract with the sceptre,” Bruce nodded. “It stands to reason that the others can be found the same way.”

“And if Thanos has been after them for as long as you say, then he knows that,” Tony pointed out. “He’s going to know where they are and he’s going to come for them. It’s not an if anymore, this is a when, guys. And we need to be ready. Taking all that into a account, we want to be able to direct the attack so that it's focused on just the one front. That way, we can stand together.”

“I’ll head down to the lab and begin digging up the algorithm we used,” said Bruce, pushing his uneaten food away. He paused to clap Thor on the shoulder, and gave Loki a nod. “Good luck, guys. I guess I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Nay, Banner,” said Thor, pulling Bruce in for what looked like a crushing hug. “I will see you soon, to celebrate our victory against the Mad Titan.”

“Thanks, Thor,” Bruce gasped, patting him awkwardly on the back. “But if you wouldn’t mind letting up– you’re choking me, a bit.”

Thor let go with such horrified zeal that Bruce was thrown backwards into Steve. Steve was nimble enough to turn and catch the toppling scientist without either of them ending up on the stove but as he spun his spatula went flying, and so did the stack of pancakes it collided with.

Natasha sighed in disappointment and passed over a crinkled ten-dollar bill. Clint accepted it smugly,
his smirk only growing when Steve, with one pancake slipping down his head and another balanced on his shoulder, pouted at the exchange rather petulantly.

“I suppose that’s as good an image to remember you all by as any,” Loki said.

“Yeah, bet you won’t get entertainment of this quality in Knowhere,” Clint replied.

The rest of Tony’s time seemed to vanish in a blur of egg related jokes and demands for maple syrup, and before he knew it the others had said their farewells and then that was it, Thor and Loki were on their way with nothing of a fanfare or a proper send off. A recently de-pancaked Steve offered to see Thor to the roof and then they were headed into the elevator, just like that.

Tony rode with them back up to the penthouse, his hand clasped tightly in Loki’s for what would be the last time in far too long. He still was not ready to let go when they stepped out onto the landing pad, and from the way that Loki paused and drew him in close, Tony knew that he felt the same way.

“I love you,” Tony said, touching his forehead to Loki’s, relishing the feeling of their skin pressing together and knowing that it was something he was going to miss almost immediately. “Never forget that.”

“Never,” Loki vowed, tilting his head and connecting their lips instead. The kiss was soft and sweet, their movements an acknowledgement of the pact between them which could never be broken.

“You’re coming back,” Tony insisted. His fingers curled into the dark hair at Loki’s nape as he pressed their lips back together for another sweet kiss, still not willing to be parted quite yet.

“This isn’t goodbye,” Loki agreed, holding Tony impossibly tight, green eyes drinking in the sight before him as desperately as a man who feared an imminent journey into the desert. “I’ll see you again, my love, when Thanos has come to regret ever thinking he can harm me with no consequence.”

“Be careful,” Tony said. “And keep in touch, damn you, JARVIS will get upset if you stay out of contact like you did before.”

“Oh, will he?” Loki asked, an amused spark in his eye.

“Yes,” Tony said. “And so will I, you bastard. I’m going to miss you.”

Loki pulled Tony in once again, and this time their kiss was deep and bruising. Tony poured everything he had into that kiss, every ounce of passion in his body and every bit of love that he felt, and he knew that Loki was doing the same. Despite all of their promises, it felt entirely too much like they were saying goodbye. Then Loki was gone, tearing himself from Tony’s arms with such force that it only further proved his reluctance, leaving Tony feeling empty and cold as the Trickster walked away without looking back.

“Come, Thor,” he said, striding purposefully to the open space at the edge of the landing pad.

Thor had been glancing away, his ears clearly flushed red under his blonde hair. The smile he gave Tony as he turned back was bittersweet, and he followed Loki without complaint, clapping a hand to Steve’s shoulder as his final farewell.

The two brothers stood side by side, standing tall and staring straight ahead. They made a pretty picture with their Asgardian clothing and regal poise, yet Tony’s eyes were glued to Loki’s and the way that the Trickster’s lips curved up when he noticed Tony’s attention. Then Thor raised Mjölnir to call for the gatekeeper and the colourful cascade of the Bifröst slammed into the pair, pulling Loki
and Thor far away where Tony would not be able to reach them.

He stood and stared at the smouldering fingerprint for a few moments, the lingering echo of Loki’s parting smirk still ghosting through his mind’s eye. It felt odd to think that he had gone, almost difficult to wrap one’s mind around. Yet there was a sinking feeling in Tony’s gut that seemed to warn him that it would be longer than he expected before they saw each other once more.

“Tony,” said Steve, stepping up to his side. “Are you all right?”

Tony paused before answering, because he wasn’t sure what Steve wanted him to say. He wasn’t all right, of course he wasn’t, because Loki had gone away to where Thanos very well might be lying in wait. And he wasn’t alone, he had Thor and the whole of Asgard at his back, but he had still gone and Tony had been left here to protect his planet, his very vulnerable blue home. It was a goal he had been working towards for years, but it felt… hollow, knowing that he was going to have to do it without Loki by his side. Like his mission of placing armour around the world was no longer as important as everything Loki had taken with him.

Except… the world needed to be protected. He owed the Earth and its people nothing, but he owed it to himself to see the mission through, to save the planet he had invested so much time and care into. The people of this world deserved to be saved, and he had the means to do so. While he would miss Loki’s presence he knew himself well enough to know that he could still function, that he wasn’t going to fall apart. He had a job to do, damn it, and everyone, including Loki, was counting on him to do it. If he wanted to stop the Mad Titan then he was going to have to pitch in and do exactly what he fucking did best.

So Tony gave Steve a smile that was small, but full of honest determination.

“I’m just fine,” he said, turning on his heel and making his way back towards the elevator. “Now, come on. Bruce and I have an Infinity Stone to track.”

It didn’t take long. The algorithm was easier to recreate than to dig out of SHIELD’s old files that Natasha had released into the depths of the internet, and besides, Tony and Bruce had both done it once before. They were geniuses, and to do the same thing again was easy.

They used the readings they had from both the Tesseract and the Mind Stone to pinpoint the similarities, and then they set out on a world-wide search using all of Tony’s satellites. They didn’t have the added benefit of the spectrometers that SHIELD had placed on the roofs of all their labs the last time they’d run a search for an Infinity Stone, but Tony’s satellites had improved by leagues since then, and he was sure it wouldn’t take long before they had a result. They wrote the algorithm itself in just over an hour and after that, it was up to JARVIS and the satellites to do the rest of the work. All Tony and Bruce had to do was wait.

While it was running, Tony began to fiddle with his gift from Thor. He let Butterfingers handle the leather bag, making his instructions very clear and ensuring U was on standby to catch it should Butterfingers allow it to fall.

Dummy watched from the sidelines, his claw drooped in the best imitation of a pout Tony had seen him manage yet.

“All right,” Tony said to his team while Bruce watched on warily, chewing at his nails with the stress of someone unable to look way from an impending disaster. “You know what we’ve heard about this thing. It tears people apart who try to hold it, but it seems to be okay with machines, so that’s
why you lot are on construction. I’ll still be doing the wiring, but for all intents and purposes, you’re
my hands for the final operation.”

Butterfingers beeped seriously, and U bobbed his arm in agreement.

Tony was understandably nervous. The last time he’d had to rely on another person’s steady hands
during construction, he’d been in the depths of a dark cave in the middle of an Afghan desert,
watching with bated breath as Yinsen powered up the very first arc reactor. Now he was relying on
his own creations to work with a power source that was far more volatile, and Bruce’s concern was
probably entirely warranted.

Especially since, you know, Tony was trying to destroy said power source.

Well, not destroy, exactly. But he’d watched as Loki had removed the Mind Stone from his sceptre,
and he figured that the process for the Tesseract would probably be the same. The cube itself was
surely a housing unit of some kind, and the real power lay within, hidden behind the blue glow.

He just needed his bots to destroy it properly.

Loki had used his magic, shattering the orb set into the staff with a bright green blast. Tony didn’t
have magic, but he did have a tower powered by arc reactor technology at his disposal.

“We’re going dark,” said Tony. “J, did you warn everyone?”

“Stark Industries employees believe that an evacuation drill is going to take place this afternoon,”
JARVIS replied. “The Avengers are currently in a pizza parlour two blocks away.”

“Good,” said Tony. “All right, Bruce, hit the button.”

Bruce winced but did as he was told, turning the safety lever and pressing the button that Tony had
made sure was big and red for shits and giggles. Avengers Tower darkened as power was diverted to
Tony’s workshop, and his repurposed heavy duty cutting laser burned into the Tesseract with the all
the power of a nuclear bomb. Tony braced behind the Hulk-proof screen he and Bruce had set up,
expecting an explosion, and he was glad that they did. The Tesseract shattered with a shockwave
that shook the whole workshop, and the bots whined in a high-pitched scream as they were thrown
against the walls. Blue power tore through the projects sitting on nearby tables and the ceiling
cracked under the stress, but when the glow receded, a small blue gem sat quietly on the singed
workbench and everyone in the room was left alive.

“My god,” said Bruce, stepping out first to examine the Stone.

“Don’t touch it,” Tony warned, which gained him an exasperated eye roll. “But well done everyone,
I think that went well.”

Bruce was all too used to him to react further, instead leaning in toward the Stone with interest.

“SHIELD was right, this really could revolutionise the search for renewable energy.”

“No need,” Tony said. “Speaking of– hey J, you all right up there?”

“As always, Sir,” JARVIS said. “Tower systems are undamaged. We’ll be back online in an
estimated two minutes.”

The three bots grumbled as they rolled back toward the centre of the room, each of them looking a little disgruntled at the turn of events. Dummy, especially, seemed to be glaring at the Space Stone like it had personally insulted him.

“Well done, guys, you did great,” Tony told them, pleased to see that the only damage appeared to be aesthetic. “Are you up for round two?”

Butterfingers whined.

“What are you going to do with it?” Bruce asked, looking away from the Stone to shoot a wary glance in Tony’s direction. “You’re not going to experiment on it, are you?”

“Bruce, who do you take me for?” Tony gasped, jokingly placing a hand over his heart. “I’m a scientist, of course I’m going to do experiments on it.”

“Tony,” Bruce groaned, “Please tell me you remember what happened the last time we played around with an Infinity Stone—“

“I really don’t think a killer robot is going to come out of this one, Brucie,” Tony tried.

“You didn’t think that the last time,” Bruce replied.

“I did, actually,” Tony shot back. “I was just hoping the killer robot would be on our side, remember?”

“Unfortunately. That backfired rather spectacularly.”

“But it won’t this time,” Tony assured him. “Promise.”

“You know what?” Bruce said. “I’m not entirely sure that I want to know what you’re going to do with this. I’m going to go back to tracking the Time Stone. Please try not to blow everything up and kill us all.”

“Oh, Brucie, you always try to take away my fun,” Tony said fondly.

Butterfingers and U were reluctant to help again, but when Dummy charged forward with vicious enthusiasm they managed to redirect him to the side, probably worried for everyone’s safety.

Tony already had a starkanium casing ready to go that he thought would only take a small amount of tweaking before he could make it do what he wanted, but he eyed the shattered crystal on the floor, the remnants of the broken Tesseract, and he wondered if they might be useful.

“Hey, J?” Tony asked. “Do you think we could use this? Melt it down, maybe? Do you think it could be melted?”

“I do not believe I could answer that question until you have tried,” JARVIS said dryly. “Or at the very least allow me to conduct a scan.”

Bruce looked up from his screen with narrowed eyes, and Tony gave him a bright smile before turning conspiratorially to his bots.

“Come on, kids,” said Tony, giving Butterfingers an encouraging pat. “I’m going to need some really steady hands.”
Later that night the Avengers had assembled in the common floor living room once again, Pietro claiming that since the movie night had been disrupted the day before, he deserved another chance. Despite the extra preparation time he still had yet to pick a movie, however, and Clint had retreated to the kitchen for snacks while Tony was left with an interrogation about the new design of the arc reactor on his chest.

“IT’S still the Mark L armour,” Tony told them, demonstrating by allowing the red chest plate to bleed out over his shirt before retracting back into the reactor. "But the new energy source allows for greater power output without sacrificing any capabilities or adding weight.”

“The new energy source?” Bruce asked, raising his brow.

“Yeah,” said Tony, holding his gaze. “I’ve redesigned the reactor.” He tapped at the shining blue plate held flush against his chest by a combination of implants and nanotech. It was removable, but only if you knew how. “It’s far better than the old ones, and far more portable.” It did stick out a bit from his chest due to the, uh, the new energy source, but no more so than the original reactor had, and it was far more comfortable than that.

“Huh,” said Sam, leaning in for a better look. “That’s nifty.”

“Hey, watch it,” said Tony, wrinkling his nose in good humour. “My eyes are up here, buddy.”

“And where did you hide the Tesseract?” Natasha asked from her perch on the comfiest armchair. “You know what will happen if Thanos gets his hands on it—“

“It’s safe,” Tony said. “I promise.”

“Yes, but where?” Clint asked, walking into the room with three large bowls balanced rather precariously in his hands. “I’d feel better knowing exactly how you hid it, especially since we’re all aware of just how secure your top secret safe is—“

“Dummy let Loki in, that’s hardly tantamount to treason,” Tony said, rolling his eyes.

“It would have been, not so long ago,” Clint muttered, the bowls wobbling in his irritation.

Tony was on his feet without thinking, his hands curled into fists by his sides, but Steve was just as quick in anticipating his reaction and had a hand on Tony’s shoulder before he could do much else, his touch equally calming and restraining.

“I thought you were past that,” Tony said harshly.

“It’s hard to get past having your mind messed with,” Clint replied, somehow finding the one thing that could have stopped Tony in that moment. Because Tony knew what that felt like, and he couldn’t begrudge Clint some lingering resentment. That he had come so far was testament to Clint’s character— Tony did not think he could have been so lenient had Wanda Maximoff joined the team and moved into the same building as him.

Sam stepped up to Clint’s side, his expression not pitying, but offering up comfort.

“Look, man, it’s not Loki,” Clint said after a moment, sighing heavily. “I’m sorry for saying it. But with the Tesseract so close, and with Loki in possession of the Mind Stone again—“

“Loki isn’t here,” Tony said, his words tense. “Not that that would make a difference, because there’s no way in hell he would ever do that to you again.”
“I know that,” Clint insisted. “God help me, but I trust the guy at least that far. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t feel uneasy.”

Tony nodded, relaxing enough that Steve was comfortable to let go.

“Mind magic, dude,” said Clint, finally moving to begin handing out the bowls in his hands. "Shit's just nasty."

Pietro made a small noise that was almost a whine but not quite, and Tony glanced over in sympathy. But Pietro was already looking back to the screen, flicking through the extensive list of movies JARVIS had on offer. Tony hummed deep in the back of his throat. They were a broken lot, the Avengers, not a single one without their own demons. But they were still a team, still a family.

And with that thought in mind, Tony knew what he needed to do.

“It’s probably best that not everyone knows where I’ve hidden it,” Tony finally said, and then held up his hand against the predicted outcry. “Look, if Thanos believes you know where it is he’ll try and get it out of you.”

“That’s smart,” said Sam, glaring at Clint as he opened his mouth to complain. “No, listen. We don’t know what this Thanos is capable of, or even who he is. But we do know that he’s killed most of Asgard, and that both Thor and Loki seemed afraid of him.”

“He’s the reason Loki came here, before,” Tony said, and the others all glanced up in surprise.

“What do you mean?” asked Bruce.

“He never told all of you,” Tony said. “It took him years before he told me, and I’m not going to betray his trust. But… suffice to say that Loki did not attack New York of his own free will.”

“He didn’t look good when he first came through the portal,” Clint muttered. “I remember that day very clearly, and I remember thinking that he looked like he’d been through hell.”

Tony swallowed hard, remembering the anguish and pain that had shown in Loki’s eyes and in his trembling voice when he had recounted the story mere months ago. “Trust me. If you have something that Thanos wants, he will take it from you, no matter how strong you are. I will not put any of you in a position that might result in you going through that.”

“Tony, that’s touching,” said Natasha, “but it’s also demeaning.”

“I think you’re underestimating him,” Tony started, but she shook her head.

“Every one of us here is willing to go through anything for this team,” Natasha said, and the others started to nod in agreement until she added– “You’re not the only one here who is stupidly self-sacrificing.”

Steve ducked his head as if he had been personally attacked.

“Hey, speak for yourself,” Sam complained. “I’m perfectly happy with my life the way it is, thanks.”

“You’re still not even officially on the team,” Tony teased, refusing to let them see how his throat was a little tight.

“I’m still not sure I want to be,” Sam pointed out, his grin just as teasing as Tony’s. “I’m happy to hang on the fence with Spider-Boy.”
“There’s a joke about birds in there somewhere,” Tony said.

“Stop trying to change the subject,” said Natasha. “You know that it’s smarter to have more than one person aware of its location. Just in case.”

“Oh, that’s cheery,” Tony groaned. “But I’m still not telling you where the Tesseract is.”

“It’s in the arc reactor,” said Bruce.

“What?” Tony gasped. “You really think I would sully my own tech with alien nonsense?”

“Your last three armours have had Loki’s magic on them,” Natasha pointed out dryly, and Tony huffed. “Really? The arc reactor?”

“You’re carrying that thing around with you?” Steve asked. “Tony, do you know how dangerous that is?”

“I was careful!” Tony insisted.

“He blew up his workshop,” Bruce told them.

“Only a little,” Tony said to the others while he shot Bruce a glare. “Really, Brucie? What happened to Science Bros before Avenger—“

“I’m going to stop you before you finish that sentence,” said Natasha, holding up a hand, though her gaze was caught on the blue glow showing through the hole cut in Tony’s shirt. “Seriously, Tony? You’ve got an Infinity Stone strapped to your chest?”

“You say that like you are surprised he did it,” Pietro muttered, abandoning the TV to join the conversation. “That is dangerous, Stark. And stupid.”

“They won’t expect it,” Tony pointed out, not entirely sure why the guy seemed to care, anyway. Pietro still hated him. “And this way, it will never be unguarded.”

“You’re using it to power your new suit,” Steve growled, and Tony groaned with sudden realisation.

“Okay, Steve, I know what this looks like, but I promise I’m not—“

“You’re not what? Turning into SHIELD? Into HYDRA?”

“I’m not,” Tony insisted. “Look. I needed somewhere to put it that I can protect it, right? Somewhere that the Stone would always be where I could see it, where I knew that it was safe. And this way, I can use it, don’t you see? What if Thanos comes here before Loki gets back? This is our best weapon against Thanos, and you all know it. He has an Infinity Stone already, and the only way Odin beat that was with two. We have one, and we’re on track to finding another. If we don’t use them, what chance do we have?”

“And you weren’t going to tell us?” Sam asked. “Dude, come on. Even you should know that a team doesn’t work if we don’t know what all the other players are doing.”

“Even me?” Tony asked, raising a brow. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I just mean that you’re used to working alone,” Sam said, raising his hands pleadingly. “I didn’t mean anything bad, I promise. Just that while you’ve been with the Avengers for a while now, you’re still used to playing things close to the chest, but in a team, we need to know what’s going on.”
“I know that,” Tony snapped. “I had this conversation with Steve and the others years ago, you’re a little late with the teamwork lecture.”

“Tony, stop,” said Natasha. “Don’t do this.”

Tony turned to her, readying himself for the inevitable continuation of the argument. But she merely smiled at him, her usually hard expression going soft.

“We can handle ourselves,” she told him.

“I know you can,” Tony said. “But—“

“No buts,” Bruce cut in. “We’re a team, Tony. That doesn’t mean keeping everyone else safe by keeping them in the dark. It means that we keep each other safe by standing together.”

“Oh, right,” said Sam.

Tony smiled at them all weakly, the warmth from their words not quite enough to dampen the dread that was blooming in his chest. He’d hoped he could keep his plan for the Space Stone secret, but he should have known better.

“Speaking of team spirit and mind magic, there is something else that I want to pass by everyone,” said Steve. Tony tensed even further as he realised that despite Steve’s words, his blue eyes were flickering almost constantly in Tony’s direction. “Although, if you don’t mind, I would like to speak to Tony first.”

“Cap, we just had a conversation about secrets,” Clint pointed out. “Again. It’s becoming a bit of a recurring theme.”

“I’m going to tell everyone,” Steve promised, “But I need to pass it by Tony first.”

Tony reluctantly followed Steve into the kitchen, and it only took a moment before all his suspicions were confirmed.

“I’ve been in contact with Wakanda,” Steve said, and Tony immediately flinched back, already knowing what was coming.

“You think he’s ready,” Tony said, his voice unusually bland.

“I think we need him,” Steve corrected. “You heard what Thor said, and you know as well as I that we’re going to need help.”

“We can get help elsewhere,” Tony said. “The world is overrun with people who think they’re heroes these days, we can recruit a few of those. They’ll help when they know that the world is at stake.”

“They’re not him,” Steve said gently. “He could really help us. He’s strong, he’s an incredible fighter, and he’s got more experience than anyone else that we could possibly ask. Even if he doesn’t remember it entirely, you know that experience counts for more than simple skill is worth.”

Tony closed his eyes and turned away, not wanting to think about exactly what those experiences encompassed.

“But you’re my friend,” Steve continued, his hand finding its usual place on Tony’s shoulder. “I know that it would be hard for you, and if you say so, I’ll let it drop and I won’t mention it again. He
will always be my friend, and I won’t abandon him, but I’ll never ask for him to join the team unless you say it’s all right, first. This is your choice, Tony. Yours."

The care in Steve’s voice was smothering, and Tony heard his own gasping breaths with a strange sense of detachment. He felt like he was hardly present, caught in his own thoughts of distress. Steve’s hand tightened on his shoulder, grounding him, and Tony became aware of Steve worriedly telling him to breathe. It was all just too much all at once and Tony felt like he was drowning, and in that moment there was only one thing that he felt like he could do.

“Pass it by the rest of the team,” Tony said hoarsely, shrugging off Steve's hand and heading back into the main room. “Their voices count just as much as mine.”

“Tony—"

“I shouldn’t get the deciding vote, not when this involves everyone’s safety,” Tony said gratingly. The others looked up curiously when Tony entered, and he felt himself freeze, his feet leaden.

“If you say so,” Steve’s voice repeated quietly from behind him, “I will never mention this again.”

“Steve,” Tony said weakly. “Please.”

He felt Steve pause, clearly unsure of what Tony meant, but Tony wasn’t really sure either. Steve really, truly cared about Tony’s emotional state, and was willing to delay his reunion with his oldest friend on Tony’s say so. Steve was such a good friend and Tony loved him for it, wished that he could give Steve what he clearly so desperately wanted, but… Tony knew that his parent’s deaths had been HYDRA’s machination, he knew that, but he wasn’t sure if he could cope with seeing the very hands that had killed his mother. He wasn’t sure that he was strong enough, and he didn’t want to end up doing something that would hurt Steve even more.

“Sir, I am sorry to interrupt,” JARVIS said, and had the AI owned a corporeal form, Tony would have kissed him for his timing. “The algorithm that has been running to locate the Time Stone has found a match.”

Bruce stood from his seat immediately. “Where is it, JARVIS?”

“It is not an exact location,” JARVIS warned. “The algorithm found an energy output from one year ago which matches the signature of an Infinity Stone.”

Pietro groaned and said something in Serbian under his breath. “I am never going to be able to pick a movie, am I?” he complained.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Natasha said, joining Bruce. “We have work to do.”

“One year ago,” Steve commented, his voice still a little rough. “It could be long gone by now.”

“But it is a place to start,” said Clint.

“Where, J?” Tony asked, pushing the hard feelings away with practiced efficiency. “Don’t tell me it’s here in New York.”

“No, that would be far too easy.” JARVIS seemed to hesitate. “The energy burst was in Hong Kong.”

Tony groaned and fell back into the couch with a slump. “Well, crap,” he said. “This is going to be a problem.”
I've been considering writing Loki's absence from his point of view, but since I've never written from his perspective before I'm a little hesitant. If I do, it will probably be in the form of just one chapter, bc if I post small sections as chapters in line with what Tony's doing it probably won't work bc Loki's chapters would be a lot shorter, and it would interrupt the flow of what I've planned. So mostly I'm thinking that I could post it as a separate one-shot, or as a single chapter on this fic after Loki is back with Tony. Both options seem a bit off, though?

Basically, I'm putting this here to see what you guys think. Is that something you'd want at all, and if so, what option would you prefer?
Chapter Summary

‘Politics has its uses, my dear. You just need to apply the correct pressure in exactly the right place.’

Chapter Notes

atm it’s looking like I’m going to write Loki’s pov as a one-shot and post it to this series when he comes back into the story. Thanks for the input!

Fucking politics.

There was very little in the world that Tony hated more than dealing with politicians, yet it was something that he had been forced into from a ridiculously young age. He’d thought that maybe it would get better now that he was part of a team, especially a team that included Captain America because, honestly, what person could say no to those pretty blue eyes and his earnest desire to do the right thing?

The answer to that question, unfortunately, was fucking politicians, so of fucking course it fell to Tony and his years of practice dealing with the leeches to sort out their little problem.

One of the major stipulations of the Avengers’ Accords was that the Avengers team, based in the United States, would not be allowed to operate outside of those sovereign borders without the express permission of the majority of the Council and the involved country’s council representative. For that, the team needed proof that their projected mission was both necessary and justified, and unfortunately, the argument of ‘we tracked a year old energy signature from a magic stone a god told us to find’ just didn’t hold up amongst seasoned politicians. Anything less than solid proof and they also needed the express permission of the country’s government, which would not happen without proof anyway.

They needed to go to Hong Kong, but they weren’t fucking allowed to. It was like being a child all over again, except worse, because Howard had never even cared when Tony stole the company jet and went on unscheduled trips across the Atlantic when he was supposed to be writing a thesis.

It wasn’t that Tony didn’t understand– he did, he got it, he even agreed that countries had the right to decide whether people would be allowed within their own borders or not. But that didn’t mean that he had to agree with their stupid decision to keep the Avengers out when it was entirely possible that the fate of the world was in the balance.

‘I hate this,’ Tony texted in the middle of one particularly boring conference that he was half sure he didn’t need to listen to, hiding his phone under the table like a high-schooler. ‘Remind me why this is necessary?’

‘Because you agreed to sign their little treaty to appease their cowardly insecurities,’ Loki sent back,
and Tony had to stifle a snort.

‘Right, that’s it. Seemed like a good idea at the time.’

‘I still do not understand why Midgard insists upon breaking itself into factions. One ruler is far more efficient.’

‘Oh, yeah? How’s that been working out for Thor, then?’

‘Thor is well,’ Loki replied, and Tony could picture the tight smile that would cross his face as he typed the words. ‘He still fears his own incompetence, but he has grown much in recent years.’

‘That almost sounded like a compliment.’

The next response was slower in coming, and Tony frowned as he read it.

‘I have few friends, here. Being cordial to Thor is a concession I have been forced to make.’

‘Are they treating you all right?’

‘Asgard welcomes me only when they are in need,’ Loki wrote. ‘Her people are fickle creatures who know little of loyalty.’

‘Things are going well, then?’ Tony asked, his frown still in place. It sounded like Asgard was at least being welcoming, but Loki was a master at spotting a lie.

‘Little better than they seem to be for you.’

‘It would be easier if you were here.’

‘I would simply kill them all for you.’

Tony smiled fondly. ‘Exactly.’

“Mr Stark!”

“Yes, honey?” Tony said, glancing up from his phone to see the Council’s Chairperson frown in annoyance.

“If you wish to complete your mission, you need to pay attention as we discuss details,” she said, her voice polite but cutting in that special politician tone.

“I was under the impression that the mission wasn’t going ahead,” Tony replied. “Have you changed your mind?”

“We need to talk to the Hong Kong government first,” Chairperson Susan Hanson said, tucking a stray strand of her greying hair behind her ear. “They must approve this.”

“It didn’t take this long when we needed to get into Sokovia, and they were at war,” Tony complained.

“You had concrete proof that what you needed was there, and we were able to approve the mission under the power the Accords grant us,” Hanson replied slowly, as if explaining something to a child. “You cannot even prove to us that the threat that you claim to face exists, and even if you could, we cannot send you based upon year-old data alone.”
Tony groaned. “So why am I here? It’s like 2am in Hong Kong, there’s no point in us being here until someone who can actually approve the mission wakes up.”

“We were discussing the validity of your claim,” another politician said, more kindly than the chairperson, smiling at Tony with sympathy. “And whether we will ask Hong Kong at all.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Tony said.

“Your only proof is the word of an alien,” Chairperson Hanson said firmly. “That’s not admissible, and he isn’t here for us to ask ourselves.”

“I can show you a recording of what he said, if you want,” Tony told them. “Thor was injured, and you know that anything which could achieve that is a legitimate threat.”

“To Asgard,” said Hanson, leaning forward in her chair. “Not to us. Not that we know for sure.”

“You can’t even let us go as a precautionary measure?” Tony asked. “It’s not even for a fight, it’s just recon.”

“We want to,” said the kindly politician from before, leaning forward herself. “But you know we cannot without Hong Kong’s permission, and they will not grant it without proof. Besides, reconnaissance missions often end in more destruction than planned, and that goes for more than just the Avengers.”

And that, it seemed, was the end of it.

Oh, the meeting went on for another hour or so, but it was all just useless babble with nothing new being brought to the table. They just talked about the same stuff over and over and Tony wished he could entertain himself somehow - even working on paperwork for SI was better than this nonsense - but he didn’t dare pull out a screen again when the politicians were already upset with him.

When the conference finally ended, Tony was the first one out of his seat, his phone in his hands before he was even out of the door. ‘I hate politics.’

‘Politics has its uses, my dear. You just need to apply the correct pressure in exactly the right place.’

Well, of course Loki would say that. He’d been raised among the leeches to an even greater extent than Tony had, and he was able to breeze through political manoeuvres with ease. Tony had never been like that, he’d always favoured a more hands on approach. He liked pushing the politicians around with his superior intelligence, true, but he got less joy from walking them around in circles and more from overcoming their attempts at subterfuge with grand gestures resulting in inescapable embarrassment.

He tended to loudly joke in the middle of important hearings, he liked to mess with his phone to prove how disinterested he was, he enjoyed hacking into screen displays, breaking through security systems to show them all just how much better than them he was, and how little chance they had at getting ahead of him. Basically, Tony wasn’t an undercover kind of guy. He liked to show them exactly who they had provoked—

The thought caused Tony to pause, a slow smile spreading across his lips, half a plan already beginning to unfold.

‘You know what?’ he typed, his fingers flying across the screen as he hurried to the nearest exit. ‘I think I have an idea.’
“This is a really bad idea, Tony,” said Bruce, wringing his hands as he stood in an empty space in the middle of the workshop.

“You know what you are?” Tony replied absentmindedly, hardly even sparing Bruce a glance as he focused in on his work.

“I dread to think.”

“You’re like my conscience.”

“Why do I feel like you’re about to say that you’re not very good at listening to your conscience?” Bruce sighed.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re uncannily perceptive?” Tony asked, then grinned and ignored Bruce’s frustrated groan when he managed to slot the final piece of his creation into place. “Voilà, Bruce, it’s done! What do you think?”

“I think that this is going to end very, very badly,” Bruce replied.

“Bruce, come on. I was asking whether you thought it was pretty, not for your opinion. Honestly.”

“I’m pretty sure this is illegal.”

“That’s entirely unhelpful, Bruce.”

“Good.” Bruce shook his head in what Tony decided was definitely acceptance. “I hope that when you get arrested and put on trial that you tell them I was entirely unhelpful. That I tried to stop you, even.”

“Aw, as if you would,” Tony grinned. “You love my eccentricities.”

Bruce stared at him impassively for a moment before turning to the door. “I’m going to get Steve.”

“You do that, Brucie!” Tony called after him, still examining the shiny, brand new Iron Man gauntlet sitting on the workbench. “I’m totally going to show the Council why they should listen to us when we tell them that they’re dealing with a power they don’t understand.”

“Sir, if I may,” JARVIS said, “I do not think that this is what Mr Liesmith meant when he said—“

“Have you been reading my texts again?” Tony accused, putting his hands on his hips as he narrowed his eyes at the nearest camera. He held the pose for a couple of seconds before grinning and turning back to his newest creation, busying his hands with reorganising the tools scattered over the bench as he began to ramble. “You know what, I’ll let that slide. Because yeah, I know Loki would do this differently. Because he’s magic and sneaky and he would probably be able to come up with a better plan in less time, but he’s not here and I’m all I’ve got right now.”

“Not true, Sir,” said JARVIS. To Tony’s left, Dummy, U, and Butterfingers rolled forward, beeping determinedly.

Tony looked up to them and smiled. “Thanks, guys. Now come on, we’ve got to get these new gauntlets integrated with the nanotech.”

The process was simple and something that Tony was highly practiced in by this point, so by the time that Steve charged into the workshop, Tony was wearing the whole armour but for the helmet,
and examining his newest creation.

Steve paused at the sight, and Tony shot him a grin.

“New suit?” Steve asked warily.

“Almost,” said Tony. “It’s still mostly the Mark L, but the gauntlets are new.” He lifted one hand to show Steve the silver panelling around the repulsor, which glowed a brighter blue than the near white that they had been before. “I’ve got a few more tricks up my sleeve, now.”

Steve paled. “What tricks?”

“Surely Bruce told you.”

“I was hoping he was mistaken,” Steve replied dejectedly.

“Nah,” said Tony. “Iridium is easy enough to obtain if you have enough money for it and very easy to recognise if you know what you’re looking for. Bruce is smart enough to know exactly why I needed it.”

“This is a really bad idea, Tony,” Steve told him, and Tony almost made a comment about broken records, but the Captain kept going. “There’s another way. We’ll talk to them, we’ll make them understand.”

“Tried and failed, Cap,” said Tony. “I’m sorry, but we need to get to Hong Kong as soon as we can. And this is the only way I can think of to make it happen without breaking the Accords.”

“We haven’t discussed this as a team,” Steve insisted.

“We all agreed that we need to be open about what’s happening,” Tony pointed out. “We told them we’re going after the Time Stone. If the Council is going to believe that it even exists, we need to show them why they should fear it.”

“It’s dangerous,” Steve tried. “Loki gave you that Stone because he knew you would protect it, but he was afraid that Thanos would use it to track you. It’s a poor thanks to put yourself in danger by —”

“Please don’t pull out the guilt trip, Cap,” Tony said. “It doesn’t look good on you. And besides, Loki is off risking his life with Thor, they’re going after the Aether. They trusted us to find the Time Stone, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“You’re going to get in so much trouble,” Steve groaned, but Tony smiled as he recognised the words as a concession.

“Aren’t I always?” Tony replied.

“Tony—”

“This should be fun,” said Tony, shrugging his shoulders. “I’ve always been tempted to become a super villain.”

“Mr Liesmith would be proud, Sir,” JARVIS said dryly, and despite the tone Tony knew it was his way of trying to contradict Steve’s earlier words. “I’ll be sure to record it for him.”

“Oh, god,” said Steve, covering his face with his hands as if he were too afraid to watch. “There’s no way this ends well.”
“If I don’t try something,” Tony said, gratified at least that Steve knew better than to try and stop him, “then you know that everything will just get a whole lot worse.”

—•—

Loki’s magic had always impressed Tony. Sometimes it seemed like the guy could achieve anything he wanted when he put his mind to it, and it never ceased to astound. Even now, after years of living in the same house, Tony could still look upon Loki’s feats with just as much awe as he did when they first met. Loki just made it look so effortless, and one of the things that he did more often than most else was his trick of appearing and disappearing, travelling from one place to the next with seemingly nothing more than a flick of his fingers and a flash of green.

Tony had experienced Loki’s sky-walking himself and had been captivated by the whole process, but he knew that travelling within a realm was far easier than moving between them, the transfer feeling instantaneous, like all it took was a simple thought. Thing was, a millennia of practice meant that Loki made things look a hell of a lot easier than they actually were.

To cut the story short– Tony’s first attempt at teleportation was less than stellar.

Well, it wasn’t teleportation, exactly, but Tony liked to call it that because it was so much more beam me up, Scotty than the mumbo jumbo that came with trying to explain what he actually did. But to put it simply, Tony opened a portal with his newly designed gauntlet and allowed it to envelop him, literally jumping through a shortcut sliced into the fabric of reality to leap from one place to another.

The actual portal part was fine, he had that down pat almost immediately. Selvig’s research on the Tesseract combined with Tony’s own smarts made sure of that.

His aim, on the other hand…

“Do not worry, Sir,” said JARVIS, sounding far more amused than he had any right to be. “I ensured that I recorded the entire sequence, and I am saving it to the drives to show Mr Liesmith at a later date.”

“The sass is unnecessary, JARVIS,” Tony groaned, pulling himself from the crater he had made in some poor farmer’s field when he had materialised too high to land softly, but too low to catch himself with the repulsors. “Where am I?”

“Minnesota,” said JARVIS.

Goddamn it. He’d been aiming for Chicago.

Tony almost threw himself back into his hole, but instead he remained calm and stood tall. “I guess it could have been worse,” he muttered, glaring at a rather brave cow that came a bit too close, sniffing curiously at his helmet. “I could have ended up in Canada, and then I’d have the Accords Council on my back even more than they already are.”

“I thought that was the point, Sir,” JARVIS said unhelpfully.

“Guess we’re not having deep dish pizza for lunch after all,” Tony grumbled as he took to the air, causing the poor cow to startle and jerk back with a disgruntled moo. “I’ve got a long flight home.”

—•—

“I don’t get it,” Tony complained to Bruce when he finally made it back to New York. “This thing is
“I don’t think anything can simply grant power, just like that,” Bruce said, ever the pragmatic scientist. “Everything needs practice and experience to settle in.”

“Then why the hell are these things so fucking dangerous?” Tony growled.

“Maybe that’s what makes Thanos so deadly,” Bruce mused. “The way Thor spoke about Loki and the Mind Stone makes it seem that very few can actually use the Stones to their full potential. If Thanos can wield more than one with proficiency—”

“He would be unstoppable. Even if someone else had a Stone, they would struggle to fight back anyway,” Tony finished. “Okay. You realise this is just making me want to be able to use this damn thing even more, right?”

“So practice,” said Bruce with a shrug, clearly accepting that there was no way now he was going to be able to put a stop to the whole venture. “You’re not going to get better at it just by sitting around.”

“I guess not,” Tony agreed. “All right, then. More practice it is. And if I end up dying in the process, I’ll tell Steve it was your idea.”

Bruce groaned. “Just put aside the big jumps for now. Start slow,” he pleaded. “I don’t want you ending up somewhere you can’t get home from. Or worse—what if you splinch yourself?”

“Fine,” Tony groaned. This time, he supposed, he would just have to learn how to walk before he got to run.

—•—

Following Bruce’s suggestion, Tony decided that maybe he would just try short distance jumps instead of the long-range leaps he was attempting before. Surely that would be easier?

No.

The answer was no.

In fact, the result was just as bad if not worse, because in his attempt to move from one end of the Avengers’ training room to the other, Tony managed to appear in the middle of Steve’s bedroom while the guy was just stepping out of the bathroom, dripping wet and with only a towel around his waist.

Oops. He was probably better off with the cow.

“Tony,” Steve said exasperatedly. “We’ve talked about this.”

“It was an accident, I swear,” Tony said, raising his hands. He even allowed his helmet to melt away as a sign of good faith.

“Target practice not going well?”

“You could say that,” Tony groaned, pushing away the suit entirely and sitting down on Steve’s bed with a huff. “It’s harder than I thought.”

“You’ll get it eventually,” Steve said, and Tony was impressed by how he managed to sound sincerely comforting and not a single bit concerned by that fact.
“Eventually is not soon enough,” Tony said. “I don’t like this power, Steve, but I do know that I need to learn how to use it. If I can get the portals to work... do you see what that could mean?”

“I do,” Steve said. “But I still don’t like it.”

“It’s just until Thanos is gone,” Tony started, but Steve shook his head.

“That’s not what I mean, I trust you not to abuse it,” Steve said. “But it’s dangerous, Tony, and I’m worried.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” said Tony. “I can’t use this thing. You and Loki were wrong, I’m not strong enough.”

“You are,” Steve said. “You just need more practice.”

“Practice isn’t going to help if I can’t figure out how this damned thing works,” Tony muttered.

“Maybe it just takes you where you’re needed,” Steve said comforting, quite clearly saying the first thing that came to mind.

“You needed me to see you half naked?” Tony teased, grateful for his efforts, and Steve huffed a reluctantly amused laugh.

“No,” he said. “But I do need to talk to you.”

“Oh? About what?”

“Stay here, I’m going to get changed, first,” Steve said as he moved to pull jeans and a shirt from his dresser.

“Aw, why?” Tony asked, leering at him with a joking wink. “That sight’s doing more to cheer me up than your words have been.”

Steve rolled his eyes and headed into the bathroom, and when Tony heard the lock click he couldn’t help the laugh.

By the time Steve came back out, Tony had made himself comfortable in Steve’s kitchenette, a pot of coffee and two mugs sitting out on the counter. Steve took the proffered mug gratefully and downed it in one go—he’d always said that the caffeine did little to actually wake him up, but that he seemed to have retained some kind of Pavlovian response to the taste.

“So?” Tony asked when Steve remained quiet, uncharacteristically pouring himself a second cup. “What’s up?”

Steve appeared to remain engrossed in his coffee for a few more moments, staring into the dark liquid as he swirled it around his mug. His expression was thoughtful and almost a little pinched, but when he finally raised his chin he was quite clearly determined.

“I don’t mean to bring this up again, and so soon, too,” he said. “But it needs to be said. I know that, and as much as you try to fight it, I think you know it as well. Some things can’t just be swept under the rug.”

Tony glanced down to his own coffee, his desire to drink it suddenly evaporating.

“This is about Barnes again,” he said, hardly needing a confirmation. Their last conversation had been interrupted and Tony had known it would only be a matter of time before he would be forced to
deal with it, but that didn’t mean that he was ready.

“I talked to the others,” Steve explained, “and they all agree that it will be all right for Bucky to come and live here.”

Tony sighed and let go of his mug, looking back up to meet Steve’s pleading gaze. “But you still want my approval, first,” he guessed.

“This is your home before it’s any of ours,” Steve said firmly. “I won’t bring him here if you say no, Tony. That’s that.”

“I’m not going to lie,” Tony groaned, rubbing at his face. “If he comes here, I’m not going to like it. He killed my mom, Steve.”

“I know,” Steve said, and Tony was grateful at least that Steve didn’t mention HYDRA. Whether or not Barnes was in control did nothing to stem Tony’s nightmares. “I know he did, Tony, and I’m so sorry.”

“We’ve been over this,” Tony said grudgingly. “I don’t get why you think you need to apologise.”

“I’m not… I’m not apologising, I’m just—”

“What? Pitying me?”

“No. I’m showing sympathy, that’s all. Empathy, maybe. I know what it’s like to lose a parent to something you can’t fight.”

Yeah, except Steve got a Second World War which let him go and beat up on Germans after his father was killed with mustard gas in the First. Sure, he probably wouldn’t have said it, he was far too nice a guy, but there was no way the thought hadn’t crossed Steve’s mind. Wars do nasty things to the minds of even the greatest of men.

It would be cruel to say though, and… Tony knew it wasn’t what Steve was referring to. His mother had been a nurse back when medicine was an incredibly dangerous profession, and she had died of tuberculosis. There was no way Steve could have fought off a disease.

Tony sighed heavily, and calmed himself. Blowing up now wasn’t going to help either of them.

“Sorry,” he said, definitely in apology. “This just… it rubs me the wrong way.”

“Just say the word, then,” Steve insisted. “It’s all right, Tony, I won’t hold it against you.”

Was he… was he serious? Tony stared at Steve incredulously for a moment, before deciding that yes, he actually was.

“Your kindness is annoying sometimes, you know?” Tony said, and Steve frowned in confusion.

“It’s… what?”

“Annoying,” Tony said slowly, enunciating every syllable of the word. “You just… you have this way of being so nice that you’re impossible to say no to.”

“I don’t mean to do that,” Steve said immediately. “I’ve told you that it’s okay if you don’t like this—”

“I almost miss the Cap who argued with every word that came out of my mouth,” Tony interrupted,
shooting Steve a glare. “Stop walking on eggshells around me, it’s weird.”

Steve seemed taken aback. “Tony,” he said slowly, hesitantly. “I’m sorry if you feel like I’m—“

“Oh my god,” Tony complained, throwing his arms up and almost sending the coffee flying. “You’re doing it again.”

Steve winced and went speak again, and honestly Tony swore to god, if he was about to let another apology slip past his lips—

“Look,” Tony said, speaking before Steve had the chance, “I’m thankful that you’re trying to be nice, okay? But just… don’t. You’re making me feel weak.”

Steve was already shaking his head. “That’s not what I mean,” he said. “You know I think you’re one of the strongest men I’ve ever met.”

“You’re still doing it,” Tony whined.

“It’s okay to miss him, Tony,” said Steve, his eyes blazing. “You don’t have to be stoic for all of us. We get it.”

Tony ducked his head. “I thought we were talking about Barnes.”

“You already have a lot to be dealing with,” Steve said softly. “I wouldn’t have asked, but you know we need all the help we can get.”

“Steve,” Tony groaned. Did the guy never stop? “Call T’Challa, for fuck’s sake. Get him to bring Barnes back, we have room in the Tower and you’re right. We need him.”

It was funny, the way that Steve’s face brightened with only a few words. Tony hadn’t noticed the shadow across his face until it had been lifted, and his smile was blinding.

“If you think you’re about to thank me you have another thing coming,” Tony snapped, holding up his hand. “Cap, my one condition for letting Barnes be here is that you have to stop being nice to me. It’s unnerving and it’s putting me off my game. I need to be able to concentrate.”

Steve’s only response was to laugh, so Tony decided to take that as an affirmative answer. He also decided to take his leave. He’d agreed to allowing Barnes in the Tower and he was almost being honest when he thought that he might be able to deal with it. The Tower was large, and hell, while Pietro didn’t actively live in the place he spent most of his time there and managed to still avoid Tony perfectly well. Most of the time.

Then again, Pietro had super speed and was able to leave a room immediately whenever Tony entered, a luxury which Tony would not have.

Tony pushed his coffee away (was he cursed to always leave cold coffee behind after a conversation with Steve?) and stood, planning to just up and go. Surely Steve couldn’t begrudge him that?

But, predictably—

“Wait, Tony,” Steve said, causing him to pause in the doorway. “I think I might be able to help you with your other problem.”

“Oh?” Tony tried to infuse his tone with interest, but from Steve’s small smile he knew he hadn’t succeeded. He swallowed hard, and tried again. “I thought you were against all that?”
“Oh, I am,” Steve agreed. “But I also know that I’m not going to be able to convince you to stop, so I thought I might offer you some advice before you kill yourself.”

“Excuse you,” Tony said, affronted. “I’m not going to—“

“Tony, come on.” Steve’s smile grew and Tony knew Steve was playing him - probably had been the entire time with the niceness - but he figured it was for a good cause. Steve only ever seemed to care, these days. It was… yeah, it had gone way past irritating, but it was also sort of… well, nice, Tony supposed.

“Okay,” Tony sighed. “What are you thinking?”

As Steve laid it out, Tony wasn’t entirely sure that it was plausible. It was clear that Steve didn’t quite understand how the Space Stone worked, didn’t quite get how Tony was managing the jumps that he had. Then he thought back to his conversation with Bruce, about how he’d thought the Stone would grant him access to instant power. He’d gone into it thinking as a scientist, thinking that there would be one way to make it work, one formula of perfect control. But the Infinity Stones, as Loki had explained them, were essentially cheat codes to the universe. They let you do what you wanted, so long as it related to its particular sphere of influence.

That was why Tony could use the Space Stone to teleport– he was travelling not over a distance or through space, but merely shifting his mass from occupying one particular space to another. Theoretically, Tony would be able to manage that with, well, anything. He just needed to broaden his thinking. With the right mind-set…

Tony thought it over, a grin stretching slowly across his face. It would take a bit more trial and error, but Steve’s plan could work.

“So, I guess you will be able to play super villain, after all,” Steve said dryly.

“Oh,” Tony preened, “I’m going to enjoy this.”

—•—

When Tony had first planned his little scheme, he had been intending to burst in on a meeting he hadn’t been invited to, stepping out of thin air and showing the Council just what they were dismissing as unimportant.

Unfortunately, his inability to aim his portals meant that he had to rework the plan a little, but he still thought it would have a high chance of success.

After all, it was true that he couldn’t aim, but– the destination only mattered if what he was sending was alive. As Steve had suggested, the council didn’t need to know that Tony was unable to choose where his portals would end up. They just needed to think that he was in control.

They just needed to be shown a spectacle, and that, more than anything else, was most certainly in Tony’s area of expertise.

The conference was as boring as usual, once again uselessly set at a time when people in Hong Kong would be fast asleep. Tony was sitting in his place and just waiting for an opportunity, just waiting for one of the politicians to give him an opening.

‘Hey Loki?’ he texted, half as a precautionary measure and half in an attempt to entertain himself while he waited. ‘If I get arrested, you’ll break me out of prison, right?’
“Stark!” Tony looked up to see Chairperson Hanson glaring at him once again, her eyes sharp as they drilled into him with distaste. “Once again you treat us with disdain. Don’t you care about your mission any more?”

“Don’t I care?” Tony asked, almost giggled, in fact, sliding his vibrating phone into his pocket and placing his hands upon the table, his fingers spread flat across the varnished surface. “I have been asking you for permission to visit another country to check out a lead on one of the most powerful artefacts in the universe, and you have been blocking me at every turn.”

“We can’t allow you to simply waltz into another country without good reason,” Hanson tried.

“Oh, I know,” Tony said. “But that’s why I need to give you a good reason.”

As Tony stood from his chair, the nanotech bled over his Tom Ford suit and encased him head to toe in metal, the arc reactor shining a bright blue in the centre of his chest.

“Stark,” said Hanson, her tone instantly lower in warning, though Tony almost smirked behind the helmet when he saw the way she leaned back slightly in her chair. “Stop this game, and sit back down now.”

“Oh, this isn’t a game.” Tony raised his right hand, repulsor aimed forward. “You see, a rather interesting object came into my possession recently. It’s not the object that the Avengers have been searching for, but it’s somewhat similar in power.”

“Last warning, Stark,” said Hanson, and Tony noticed how one of her hands was under the table, no doubt ready to press a panic button. Wow, the Council really did have little trust– so much for the rousing speech after the Avengers had saved the UN from Doom. Not that it mattered– the politician who had been texting under the table even longer than Tony had no doubt already alerted someone.

Besides, there was no way Tony was going to back down. He was willing to see this thing through. Tony charged his gauntlet, taking no notice of the way that the politicians danced backward and almost fell out of their chairs in an attempt to get out of his line of fire. One politician actually did fall out of his chair, and that presented Tony with his first target.

He had designed the gauntlet to form portals as easily as he fired repulsors– although, he’d also designed it to form a portal around himself, not something else. But that didn’t matter, because the chair was disposable, so if he got it wrong–

Yeah, okay, the first chair got splinched. Tony winced as only half of it disappeared into the swirl of blue power, leaving the rest behind to fall on the floor pathetically on its single remaining leg. Still, it had just as much if not more of an effect on the politicians.

“Holy shit,” said phone dude.

“Holy shit is right,” Tony snapped, firing up his boots and jumping into the air, mentally thanking the UN for their love of high ceilings as he melted the doorknob and sealed the door with a quick laser and then disappeared a good chunk of the table in another swath of blue. “Do you see what this makes me capable of? Do you see why this threat needs to be taken seriously?”

The room was alight with blue as chairs and tables vanished and reappeared- he tried to make them come back into the room and was gratified to see that it worked a few times, but for the most part the furniture simply disappeared to never be seen again. Tony figured it would all probably show up in a field in Minnesota eventually.
“This isn’t just about one nation,” Tony said, spreading his arms as he hovered above the chaos below. “This is about the state of the world.”

“Sir,” said JARVIS, his voice a calming contrast to the mess in the room and the pounding on the door from the SSS who had no doubt assembled outside. “I have Mr Liesmith on the line, he would like to talk with you.”

“Not now, JARVIS,” Tony said, the words almost paining him. Any other time and he would be glad to hear Loki’s voice, but he was busy.

“Stand down, Stark!” Hanson shouted, ducking to avoid half of the projector screen as it fluttered down from where it had reappeared near the ceiling. “You’re not doing yourself or your team any favours!”

“Do you understand, yet?” Tony shouted back. “Do you see the power I hold in the palm of my hand?”

“Sir, he is being rather insistent.”

“So distract him, JARVIS—“

“Anthony, I am almost beginning to believe that you do not wish to speak with me,” Loki said, his affronted tone the most beautiful thing Tony had heard in days.

“I can promise you that is not the case,” Tony said, unable to keep his smile off his face despite the inconvenience. “However, right at this moment—“

“You’re too busy attacking mortals?” Loki asked. “Yes, JARVIS gave me the update. I am gone for only a few days and already you are trying to get yourself arrested. Is this a cry for attention?”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Anthony, the sort of attention you’re going to get will not be the fun kind,” Loki snapped. “I gave you the stone to protect it and yourself, not to terrify the Accords Council.”

Tony glanced down to where the politicians were crouched together in the corner of the now mostly bare room. To be honest, they didn’t look terrified. They just looked angry. And besides, it wasn’t like Loki to tell Tony to stop causing chaos.

“You’re wound pretty tight,” Tony commented. “Loki, what’s going on in Asgard?”

Loki sighed heavily, and Tony knew that he had hit the nail on the head.

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“You’re wound pretty tight,” Tony commented. “Loki, what’s going on in Asgard?”

Loki sighed heavily, and Tony knew that he had hit the nail on the head.

“I am fine,” Loki said. “But I won’t be if you get yourself killed before I am able to return.”

“You said we needed to find the Time Stone,” Tony snapped, raising his gauntlet and grinning as a blue light shimmered around a section of the floor.

“All right, stop!” Hanson commanded. “What do you want, Stark?”

“I want you to listen to me, Susan,” Tony snapped. He was about to add something far more profound and relevant and world saving, but his thought process was interrupted by the sound of metal clanging against metal on the other end of a phone line, accompanied by muffled shouts. Tony couldn’t quite work out the words but he heard enough before the sounds cut off abruptly to tell that they weren’t exactly friendly.
“What was that?” Tony asked, his attention immediately turning back to the phone conversation. “Are you all right?”

“I must go,” Loki said. “But please, promise me you’ll get yourself out of this.”

“Don’t I always?” Tony said.

“No,” Loki complained. “You do not. And at the moment, you do not have me there to—”

“I’ll be fine, sweetheart,” Tony assured him. “What’ve a few politicians got on me?”

“You just attacked them. They could arrest you.”

“That’s what I have you for.”

“Anthony—“

“I’ll be fine,” Tony said. “Honestly, what’s the worst they can do to me for this?”

A sudden knock on the window had Tony spinning around immediately, worried that the SSS was trying to get in that way. But the only thing tapping on the glass was a teenager wrapped in a skin-tight red and blue suit, and Tony nearly groaned in annoyance even as the kid managed to somehow open the latch and clamber inside.

“Oh, and now there’s this guy,” Tony muttered.

“Mr Stark!” Peter exclaimed as he crawled across the ceiling. “Don’t you think you’re going a bit overboard?”

“Overboard is what they need,” Tony said. “What the hell are you doing here, kid?”

“I was on my way to the Tower and I saw the police cruisers, thought I’d check it out,” Peter replied, pausing his movements across the ceiling and tilting back his head to look at Tony from above. “If I’d known it was you I’d have just left you to it.”

“Thanks,” Tony snorted. Then he paused. “Wait— police cruisers?”

“Yeah, loads of ‘em,” said Peter. “If you were looking for attention, you sure got it.”

Tony groaned.

“Is that Peter?” Loki asked. “Good. He can keep you in line.”

“I do not need a teenage babysitter!” Tony complained.

“Do not worry, Mr Liesmith,” JARVIS said. “The Avengers were alerted some time ago. They’re on their way.”

“Fantastic,” Tony said, honestly not sarcastic in the slightest. “Bruce will totally be on my side.”

“Well, good luck, Anthony,” Loki said. “I hope you’re still alive when I make it back to Midgard.”

“Yeah, love you too,” Tony said, smiling when it took a few seconds after that before Loki’s icon finally disappeared from his HUD.

Peter, however, was not to be deterred. “You need some help with this, Mr Stark?”
Tony glanced up in disbelief. “You just found out that I’m the reason ‘loads’ of police are outside the UN, and you offer to _help_?”

“Yeah,” said Peter, the shrug of his shoulders quite clearly adding on the _obviously_. “So? What’s up?”

“You are, at the moment,” Tony said, and grinned when he heard the predicted groan.

One of the politicians decided that was his moment to throw in his two cents, looking up from where they were all still cowering near the sealed door. “Spider-Man, stop him!” he yelled.

“Nah,” Peter called back. “Iron Man’s my friend, I’m sure he’s got a good reason for this.” He glanced to Tony. “What’s the reason?”

“They’re being ignorant and stubborn,” Tony replied. “I’m just showing them how wrong they are.”

“Always a good cause,” Peter agreed, nodding seriously. “What are they wrong about, exactly?”

Tony was about to say, but changed his mind half way through. Pseudo Avenger or not, Peter was still just a kid, and he definitely did not need to be dragged into the whole Infinity Stone mess.

The point was made moot, however, when another voice broke through his comms. (Honestly, JARVIS needed to stop calling people without permission, it was getting ridiculous.)

“Tony, you need to stand down.”

“And the Avengers finally arrive,” Tony said. “Natasha, how nice to hear from you. Whose side are you taking today?”

“Yours, dumbass,” Natasha replied. “We’re all down here coralling the cops.”

“And I’d like it known that I told you so,” said Bruce. “But listen, Tony, we don’t need to go to Hong Kong any more. I got another hit with the algorithm– not as strong, but more recent. The Time Stone is in New York.”

“Of course it is,” Tony groaned.

“Get out here. Since it’s in the US, we can simply go and get it,” Steve added.

“And I’d like it known that you encouraged this, Cap,” Tony said, before looking back to the politicians. “Okay, folks,” he called down. “My apologies. It would seem that you don’t get to see my party trick after all.”

“That’s a stolen line,” Bruce complained in his ear.

“You should be honoured that I would use it at a time like this,” Tony told him before once again addressing the Council. “It would seem that we no longer need to leave the country– at least, not right at this moment. But I hope you got my message. You - all of us - are facing a power that we cannot entirely comprehend.”

“I think you are facing something you cannot comprehend, Stark,” Hanson spat.

“I… I know,” Tony said slowly, blinking in confusion. She called herself a politician? “That’s literally what I just said.”

Tony very heroically blasted the door open for them before he exited via the window, reaching the
ground and alighting beside Natasha with Peter following closely behind. By the time the Council burst out of the building accompanied by the SSS, Tony was out of the suit and being dressed down by both Captain America and Black Widow while Bruce watched on with a far too amused smile on his face.

The police had been holding back on the power of Natasha’s glare alone, but they swarmed forward to meet the Council, reporters hot on their heels.

“I’ll deal with this mess,” Natasha said, narrowing her eyes at Chairperson Hanson who was already complaining loud and harsh to the SSS and the NYPD that Tony had crossed more than just the one line. “You guys go and get the Stone.”

“I can’t believe you actually did it,” Bruce said, his eyes wide as he gestured for the group to begin to move toward the quinjet parked in the street.

“You clearly haven’t known Tony long enough,” Natasha muttered. “I can’t believe you both encouraged this.”

“The Council needed to know what they were up against,” Steve said. “Tony didn’t put anyone in danger. However, it was reckless, and this isn’t just going to go away.”

“Good,” Tony said. “They needed a kick up the ass.”

“You could have been a little more subtle,” Natasha said with a shrug. “But what’s done is done, I guess.”

“All right,” Tony said with a sigh. “Where are we headed?”

“It’s not far,” said Bruce. “Greenwich Village.”

“Can I come?” Peter asked.

“No,” said Tony, smiling when he heard his answer echoed by both Bruce and Steve.

“Go to the Tower, Peter, and tell the others what’s happened,” Steve added. “Sam and Clint are probably worried, they’ll have seen it on the news.”

“Amused, more like,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “I bet they got a laugh or two out of this.”

“No doubt,” Steve replied.

Peter complained for the customary five minutes but left soon after, swinging through the streets in the direction of Avengers Tower. Tony watched him go before following Bruce and Steve into the quinjet, his mind already wondering what they were going to find in Greenwich Village.

“There are going to be consequences for this,” Natasha told them from the ground as they boarded the jet. “Tony, I’ll do my best, but the Council are not going to be happy.”

Tony kept walking, ignoring Steve’s worried frown. Yes, he knew he was going to have to face some serious repercussions for his actions, but if he’d achieved his goal then it wouldn’t matter. He didn’t need the Council happy– he needed them warned, and in that, at least, he thought that he had probably succeeded.
Sufficiently advanced technology

Chapter Summary

“Is that why you’ve always hated me?” Tony asked, raising a brow. “I just assumed it was because you knew that you’d never reach my level of raw awesomeness.”

“No, I just always thought you were a jerk,” Strange said with a shrug.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been cut in half because I had too much fun writing Stephen and it was getting close to 10k. Again.

The door to 177A Bleecker Street was remarkably unremarkable. Just ordinary varnished wood with a simple gold doorknocker, smooth and unblemished. There were no odd runes, no suspicious electronic locks, not even a scratch marring the smooth wooden surface. It was just so, so normal.

Tony didn’t trust it.

“No way there’s an Infinity Stone in there,” he said.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” said Bruce, and Tony snorted. Of course he would say that.

But Bruce did have a point, and Tony tensed when Steve reached up to knock on the door. For a moment nothing happened, and the door remained just as ordinary as any other door Tony had ever come across. Even more so, perhaps. But then there was the sound of a heavy latch and the door opened with a creak to reveal something incredibly—

“Strange?” Tony exclaimed in disbelief. “No fucking way.”

“Tony!” Steve scolded.

“Are you kidding me?” Tony said, turning to Bruce who just shrugged and shook his head with that expression which said I have absolutely no clue what you’re talking about, Tony plastered across his face. “Seriously? All this trouble and it was Stephen fucking Strange on the other side of the plain-Jane door?”

“Watch it,” said Strange. “I picked that door.”

“What happened to you?” Tony gasped, looking the ex-surgeon up and down, taking note of the odd clothes, the red cape, and the strange (ha) amulet around his neck. “You used to have such good fashion sense! I mean, your suits were a little cheap, but given what you could afford—“

“I take it you two know each other?” Bruce asked tiredly.

“Tony Stark, as I live and breathe,” Strange said, rolling his eyes. “Always such the charmer.”
“Also, what’s with the beard?” Tony continued. “They do say that imitation—“

“Shut it, Stark,” said Strange dismissively. Then he turned to Steve. How demeaning. “Was there an actual reason for your darkening of my doorstep?”

“Yes,” said Steve. “May we come in? This is of a rather sensitive nature.”

“You may, and Dr Banner,” Strange said, and Tony narrowed his eyes.

“Hang on a minute—“

“Stark, I will let you in on the condition that you apologise for what you did in ’07,” Strange cut in. Tony blinked. “What—?”

“You don’t even remember, do you?” Strange asked, raising a single, perfectly trimmed eyebrow. “Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

“Er—“

“It’s okay,” said Strange said, leaning against the doorway and crossing his arms. “I’ll wait.”

“Just apologise for whatever it was, Tony,” Steve said, rolling his eyes like he believed that Strange’s grievance could totally be legit. But Tony, on the other hand, had a lot of practice at picking out bullshit in recent years, and the smirk playing at Strange’s lips was screaming the truth louder than a confession.

“You bastard,” Tony snapped.

“Tony—“ Steve started, but Tony shook his head.

“The only time I was in New York in ’07 was for a conference about the Jerichos, and I know for a fact that you weren’t there. The mechanics of it all was a little above your pay grade.”

“No, I only ever had to deal with the destruction your weapons wrought,” Strange said with a shrug. “I’ve operated on a few soldiers in my day.”

Like he cared. Even outside the medical profession, everyone knew that Stephen Strange would only take patients he knew he could fix. But as much as Tony wanted to snap that fact out to the guy, he knew they needed his help, so he held his tongue.

Mostly, anyway.

“Is that why you’ve always hated me?” Tony asked, raising a brow. “I just assumed it was because you knew that you’d never reach my level of raw awesomeness.”

“No, I just always thought you were a jerk,” Strange said with a shrug.

“So… can we come in?” Bruce asked warily, giving Strange a small smile when the ex-surgeon’s gaze turned to him instead. “We do have things to talk about, after all.”

“Why not?” Strange said, stepping back from the door. “Be warned, though. If you touch anything cursed, I probably won’t care enough to save you.”

“Well that’s ominous,” Tony said, exchanging a dry glance with Bruce. Between the three Avengers, the only one who looked truly worried by Strange’s warning was Steve.
“What is this place?” asked Bruce, looking around the high ceilings, fairly impressive staircase and the display cases which would not have looked out of place in a museum as Strange led them into a sitting room.

“This is the New York Sanctum,” said Strange, smirking at them in a way that proved he knew how little that meant to them. His cloak was fluttering weirdly around him, even though the air was still, giving him an almost ethereal look that just made him seem like even more of a jerk in Tony’s book. It was clear that he wasn’t going to say any more, but before they could ask another voice sounded from behind a bookshelf.

“This is one of the three strongholds of the Masters of the Mystic Arts,” the voice said, low and slightly creepy. Tony narrowed his eyes at the bookshelf, ready to face whatever weird being Strange had hidden away. “We protect the world from metaphysical threats, safeguarding all that is spiritual and upholding the ancient ways.”

“Oh,” said Bruce. “Okay.”

Strange, meanwhile, was rolling his eyes so dramatically he could have given Loki a run for his money. “Stop messing around,” he said. “Get out here. Don’t make me deal with these ‘heroes’ by myself.”

“I heard those quotation marks,” Tony said.

“Good,” Strange replied. “I meant you to.”

The man who stepped around from behind the bookshelf seemed far more ordinary than Strange did, wearing a dark red wrap around tunic and a blank expression that seemed to highlight the cheeky glint in his dark eyes. But despite his near ordinariness, there was just… something about him that had the hair on Tony’s arms standing upright, a silent warning that this man was not as harmless as he looked.

“This is Wong,” said Strange, gesturing to the man almost dismissively. “Wong, be nice.”

“Pleased to meet you,” greeted Steve, polite as always.

“Avengers,” Wong said, sounding almost disinterested, though his eyes assessed each one of them carefully. “Just what every situation needs. More Americans.”

“I’m going to try not to take that personally,” said Strange, gesturing for all of them to sit on the uncomfortably squishy seats around an annoyingly low coffee table. (Maybe Tony was just a little bitter.)

The cape floated over to a cloak stand in the corner of the room and draped itself artfully. Tony watched it go in bemusement, but since no one else said anything, he didn’t either.

“You said that this was sensitive?” Strange asked once they were all settled.

“Yes,” said Steve. “You say that you protect this planet from metaphysical threats?”

“Oh good, you can listen,” said Wong, nodding his head seriously before gesturing to Strange. “You’re already a step ahead of this one.”

“Still trying not to take it personally,” Strange muttered.

“What exactly,” Steve pressed on, “Do you define as metaphysical?”
“Something not physical,” said Wong.

“Yes, thank you, Merriam Webster,” muttered Tony.

Wong didn’t exactly smile but the corners of his lips raised up, and his eyes gleamed like he had been complimented.

“I mean– are you talking about threats that are alien? Spiritual? Or just those that step outside the traditional?” Steve asked.

“We protect the world from the threats that no one else would see until it is too late,” Wong cut in. “The paranormal, the supernatural, the threats that transcend the abilities of those stuck in the physical world such as yourselves.”

“If you’re talking about magic I want to know where on Earth you guys were when Loki attacked New York,” Bruce said.

“I was in Kathmandu,” said Wong, and Tony snorted. The guy was staring to grow on him.

“And I was in the Metro-General, helping just as much as you were,” Strange pointed out, though Tony was quite sure the guy was exaggerating. Did he stop a nuke from blowing up Manhattan? “Everyone was called in for that. But I know that’s not what you meant, and to answer your actual question– Loki’s invasion was a physical attack. Meta-physical does not simply mean magic, it encompasses a much broader field than that. As such, the former Sorcerer Supreme decided that Loki was best left for SHIELD and the Avengers to deal with.”

“Yet magic is in that field,” Steve summarised. “So say if there was a powerful being planning on attacking this world, and they were going to do it physically like Loki, but with less of an army and more of a magical force—“

“Oh, I’m pretty sure there’s still going to be an army,” Tony butt in. When Steve shot him a quick glare, he added— “But yeah, of course. Mostly it’s the powerful and definitely not just physical magical artefacts that we’re worried about.”

“The Mad Titan will come to Earth,” Steve continued. “And we need all the help we can get to stop him.”

“So that’s why you’re here?” Strange asked. “To ask for our help?”

“Not exactly,” said Tony. “We don’t even know what the hell you guys do.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re magic, Tony,” said Bruce. “We’ve covered that much, at least. And they say they’re ‘mystic’.”

“How many are you?” asked Steve.

“Not enough to feel comfortable letting the world know of our existence, but more than enough to cause you problems should you betray us,” Strange said darkly.

There was a pause, and then—

“That was terrible,” said Wong.

Strange turned to him, affronted. “Excuse me?”

“You don’t have the right tone of voice for threats.” Wong turned away from the spluttering ex-
surgeon and faced the three Avengers. He lowered his chin and stared them all down, eyes blazing, before speaking in a low, dangerous voice. “Should you betray us,” he said, “you will all suffer far more than you will from whatever threat you believe you face.”

Bruce swallowed audibly.

“There,” said Wong, turning back to Strange. “That’s how you threaten someone.”

“He definitely did it better,” Tony agreed.

“Shut up, Stark,” Strange snapped.

“Getting back on topic,” Steve said, “There are objects that could help us beat the Mad Titan, objects that he himself is trying to find. Now, I believe that they would certainly fall under your purview as ‘mystic’, but even if not, if he comes here and if he finds all of these objects it will effect every—everyone. Now, I know that even for you this may be difficult to believe, but these objects are—“

“You’re collecting Infinity Stones,” Wong interrupted. Strange turned to him in exasperation, and Wong shrugged. “What? He was taking too long.”

“You’re not supposed to tell them that we have one!”

“I didn’t,” Wong said, and Tony laughed as Strange groaned. “But they know that already, or they would not be here.”

“That’s true,” said Tony. “I wouldn’t have set foot in this medieval hellhole if I didn’t think I had to.”

“Charming,” said Wong.

“Pleasure,” Tony grinned.

“If you’re looking for the Stones then you won’t find one here,” said Strange.

“Well, that’s a lie,” said Tony.

“We tracked one here,” Bruce said. Then he smiled. “By the way, were you in Hong Kong about a year ago?”

Strange narrowed his eyes, and Wong snorted.

“That sounded like a yes,” Tony said to Bruce.

“It did, didn’t it?” Steve agreed. “So why don’t we all just agree not to lie to each other from now on?”


“Is it not around your neck?” Steve asked, blinking in faux innocence. “My mistake.”

Strange’s trembling hand went to the amulet immediately, and if Steve hadn’t already been sure, that action would have confirmed it. Clearly, Strange hadn’t been in the business of negotiation for long.

“Oh look,” Tony said wryly. “He found it.”

“How?” Bruce asked, giving voice to the question that was written across Strange’s irritated
“They feel… different,” Steve said. “Like there’s a hum in the air that doesn’t quite seem to fit with everything else.” His eyes flickered to Tony’s chest and away again.

“I don’t hear anything,” said Bruce, and Tony shook his head in agreement.

“Must be the serum?” Tony suggested.

“Must be,” said Steve. “But Strange, the point is that we know you have it, and we even know which one it is. So hand over the Time Stone before things start to get messy.”

With his scarred hands clasped tightly together in his lap and his spine dead straight, Strange looked tense even without the harsh expression on his face. His sharp eyes considered Steve with deadly intelligence before turning to engage in a silent exchange with Wong, though the other man’s only contribution was a shrug and a tight pull to his lips.

“Do you know yet what the Stones are capable of?” Strange asked, turning back to the Avengers. “If you did, I doubt you’d be asking after it—unless you really are that stupid.”

“A bit,” said Tony, shrugging. “We saw the Tesseract in action during the Chitauri attack after all, and Loki had the Mind Stone for a while, but other than that…”

Steve’s eye twitched ever so slightly, but he didn’t rectify Tony’s omission.

“Let me educate you, then,” said Strange. He raised both hands with only his thumb and first two fingers straightened, and Tony’s gaze caught on the scars that ran along their length and the small tremors that shook them. So it was that he almost didn’t notice the gold accessory on Strange’s left hand, but Tony most certainly did notice when he began to trace a circle in the air with his right.

And then Tony watched in utter disbelief as Strange drew a literal, working, burning orange portal with his fingers before reaching through and pulling a book out, the portal snapping closed immediately.

“Oh no,” Bruce groaned.

Strange took no notice, and merely began to flick through the old looking book. After a few moments he shook his head and drew another portal to put the book back, and then made another to retrieve a different tome.

“How the hell are you doing that?” Tony burst out.

“Doing what?” asked Strange, the smirk on his face far too irritating to be allowed.


“It’s magic,” Strange taunted. “As Dr Banner said, I’m sure you’ve managed to work that out already. You claim to be a genius.”

“I am a genius,” Tony retorted. “And I can take anything you throw at me.”

“Even if I threw a fireball?” Strange asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Wong. “He can’t throw fireballs.”

“Wong!” Strange whined.
“Wouldn’t matter if he could,” Tony replied before turning back to Strange. “You do know who I live with, right? If I couldn’t deal with measly fireballs there’s no way I’d have survived this long.”

“And that’s why we still give Dummy access to the fire extinguisher,” Bruce sighed.

Rolling his eyes in what seemed to be his favourite reaction to everything, Strange slammed the new book down on the coffee table and gestured for them all to gather closer.

“Is that Sanskrit?” Bruce asked.

Strange nodded, and pointed to an old diagram of six brightly coloured gems, faded from age but still quite clearly depicting the Infinity Stones.

“Space, Mind, Reality, Time, Power, and Soul,” said Strange. “As you said before, the most powerful artefacts in the universe.”

Tony, of course, had had this all explained to him once before, but it was interesting to see another perspective. He’d heard the story from a god– this was how the mortals saw the problem, and it was almost terrifying in its uniformity.

The Infinity Stones, as Strange explained them, were six objects of immense power that predated the universe itself, each with the capability alone to destroy or enslave planets, and a combined force so catastrophic that it could wipe out the entire universe. As Tony already knew, they allowed the wielder to manipulate their sixth of all existence in whatever way was desired, but could only be properly commanded by one of strong enough mind, body, and will. If they could unlock the potential of even just one Stone, however, a person could become nigh unstoppable.

The reason for Strange’s attempt at ‘education’ was clear from the immediate beginning of his explanation, so it was no surprise when he closed the book with a final argument as to why he would not simply hand over the Stone.

“So you see,” Strange said, “I cannot in good conscience hand this over to you. You say that there is a threat coming—“

“There is,” Tony insisted, but Strange just carried on.

“But how am I to know that you will use the Eye well until then? You have already caused destruction, and I saw on the news how the Mind Stone was used to take magic from a girl—“

“She deserved it,” Tony muttered.

“Deserved or not, these are objects of great power and should not be treated lightly,” Strange said, shooting a glare at Wong as he did so.

Wong’s lip twitched.

“And how do we know that you’ll use it well?” Bruce asked.

“The Masters of the Mystic Arts have held the Eye for centuries,” Wong said. “The only incident involving its use so far was when Strange used it to save the world.”

“Everyone’s saved the world at least once these days,” said Tony, waving a dismissive hand. “That’s hardly impressive.”

“But it does mean that I know how to use this.”
“It won’t come to that,” said Steve. “Just tell me straight, Strange. Will you cooperate with us?”

“I believe that this Stone is best protected here,” Strange said, a hint of finality to his tone. “But I do believe that you’re telling the truth. And if a being as powerful as you say truly is trying to collect all of the Stones... I have made my decision.”

“You’ll help us,” Steve said, and despite the uncertainty that Tony felt, it seemed that Steve had found something in Strange’s explanation that gave his words confidence.

“I will not let you have the Eye of Agamotto,” said Strange said firmly. “But I will speak to the other protectors of the sanctums, and when the Mad Titan attacks, you will have our help.”

Steve held out his hand, and Strange grasped it almost immediately, shaking it firmly.

“Thank you,” Steve said. “That’s more than I could have hoped for.”

The rest of the morning disappeared in talks of communication and agreements over meeting times, but all that paled in comparison to what they had already accomplished. After all, they’d managed to track down another Infinity Stone.

Three down. Three more to go.

—•—

After watching Strange open portals like it was nothing, Tony was practically itching to pick up his phone the whole way back to Avengers Tower. The moment they arrived he scurried into his penthouse and threw himself on the couch, phone in hand all ready to ask his personal expert on portals.

It only took a few moments for a response to come through, and then Tony was tapping away and grinning at his screen despite his annoyance at the actual topic of discussion.

‘It’s all about intent,’ Loki told him after an in detail and highly embarrassing account of Tony’s impromptu trip to Minnesota. ‘You need to picture where you want to go in your mind’s eye and then will the Stone to take you there.’

‘I did that,’ Tony sent back. ‘And yet it still landed me in a farm when I asked for pizza.’

There was a brief pause before Tony received a message back, and he could almost swear he heard the laughter from all Nine Realms away.

‘What were you thinking about?’

‘When?’

“When you told it to take you to the pizza. Did you have a specific place in mind?’

‘I wanted to go to Chicago,’ Tony said. ‘I was craving some deep dish, a meat lovers, covered in meatballs and greasy, greasy cheese.’

The pause was even longer this time, and Tony had a sneaky suspicion that he was being laughed at.

‘Were there animals on this farm, per chance?’ Loki asked.

‘A few cows.’ Tony narrowed his eyes. ‘Are you saying what I think you’re saying?’
‘Your desire for meat was greater than your will to move to a specific place,’ Loki wrote, and yes, okay, this was definitely going where Tony suspected it would. ‘So the Space Stone took you to the meat that you desired.’

‘Surely there’s a cow closer to Manhattan than fucking Minnesota,’ Tony typed back.

‘Are you really trying to apply the concept of distance to the Space Stone? It is Space— for the Stone, you are currently equally far from your workshop as you are to the other side of the galaxy.’

‘You’re talking as though it’s sentient,’ Tony said, though he mulled Loki’s words over in his mind. He had to admit that, at least, made sense. When he’d been in the training room, he’d been aiming for the mats that Steve used to spar. The errant thought must have taken him to the man himself.

‘It isn’t, not really,’ Loki replied. ‘But it’s powerful enough that it can respond to such things. If it couldn’t, it would be uncontrollable.’

‘It already is,’ Tony sent back.

‘Are you giving up, then?’

Tony had a ‘no’ typed out in moments, but after his thumb had hovered over the send icon for a few seconds, he deleted it and typed out something else instead.

‘All right. I’ll try.’

‘Good luck.’

‘Thanks. And hey, enough about my problems. How’s Asgard? Have you put them all in their place yet?’

The pause was longer this time.

‘I am leaving Asgard tonight,’ Loki eventually sent. Then a moment later— ‘I will not have to put up with them for much longer.’

Oh. Tony swallowed hard, trying to force down the sudden lump in his throat. If Loki was leaving Asgard, that could mean only one thing.

‘You’re off to get the Aether, then?’ Tony asked.

‘Thor has decided that now is the right time,’ Loki sent back.

Tony wanted to message back, pleading with Loki not to do it, but he knew that it would be no use. His thumb even hovered over the green call icon for a moment, wishing he could hear Loki’s voice again before the god went off on his dangerous mission. But they had already had their parting words, and Loki didn’t need the distraction.

‘Good luck yourself, then,’ Tony eventually sent. ‘Tell me when you get back safe.’

‘Of course,’ Loki replied, and Tony smiled sadly at the screen. ‘You’ll be the first to know of my return to this dreary place. There is no need to worry, I have been told that the trip will be uneventful.’

Staring down at that small bubble of text, Tony couldn’t help but worry that whomever Loki had spoken with had lied.
The first time a sparking portal appeared in Avengers Tower, Clint shot at it.

To be fair, it had appeared in the middle of the archer’s bedroom when he had been taking nap, and while Tony found it odd that Clint had his bow to hand (did he cuddle with the thing?) he did find the reaction entirely warranted.

The yelling attracted the rest of the Tower’s residents and Strange was quickly introduced, but Clint was still (understandably) not entirely pleased with the situation.

Strange, who had only remained unharmed through quick reflexes and a magic shield, insisted that in the plans to Stark Tower, that room had been a conference room that would have been the perfect place to appear.

“And you didn’t think that things in here might have changed after Stark Tower got trashed and turned into Avengers Tower?” Clint asked, still in pyjama pants and a loose T-shirt but somehow still managing to look menacing.

“Obviously, the thought had not crossed my mind,” Strange said, his cloak fluttering about his ankles in a manner that was oddly yet unmistakably affronted.

“Why the fuck couldn’t you have just come in through the door like a normal person?” Clint asked. “We do have an elevator.”

“Is no one else concerned that he was looking at plans to the Tower?” Tony asked.

“Out-dated plans,” said Bruce, patting Tony comfortingly on the shoulder.

“I could have flown to the window if you preferred,” Strange said, ignoring Tony entirely.

“Yes,” snapped Clint. “We would have preferred. We live with Thor and Iron Man, we’re used to that. We have a balcony. Even Spider-Man enters our building like a civilised human being.”

“Wait, wait, back up,” said Sam, who had until this moment been watching the whole event unfold with an amused grin. “You can fly?”

“He has a magic cloak,” Steve told him.

The bottom corner of the cloak lifted and gave Sam a wave.

“Oh,” said Sam, waving back hesitantly. “Yeah, okay. Magic cloak. Of course he does.”

“Stop that,” Strange hissed, flicking the edge of his cloak without even looking down.

“Was there an actual reason you came here, Strange?” Tony asked. “Or are you just here to provide a moving target for Hawkeye?”

“I have spoken with the leader of the Sanctums,” Strange said.

“Are we supposed to know what that means?” asked Clint.

“He’s chatted with his wizard friends,” Tony helpfully translated.

“Yes, I sent them all an owl,” Strange said, rolling his eyes, “and they’ve all agreed to help should the need arise. Thought you’d like to know.”
Tony pulled a face Strange’s back, and he could have sworn the cloak flipped him off.

“Yes,” said Steve. “Thank you.”

“In that case, I’ll take my leave,” said Strange.

“It was nice to meet you,” said Natasha, giving him a sweet smile that made Tony want to gag and giggle in equal measure. “Just… next time, enter through the balcony. Clint can be a little sensitive.”

Strange nodded. “I’d noticed.”

Clint opened his mouth to respond but Strange merely shot him a wink and raised his gold-adorned hands.

“I’ll be in touch,” Strange said, already drawing his own portal. He stepped through without waiting for a reply and the circle of orange sparks snapped closed behind him.

“I really hate that guy,” Tony groaned.

“You what?” said Natasha. “I like him. He reminds me of someone.”

“Definitely,” Bruce chimed in. “I think it’s the beard.”

The gesture Tony shot in their direction was not particularly polite. He blamed the magic cape. It was a bad influence.

“Tell you what, though,” said Clint, a slow smile spreading across his lips. “I can’t wait until we get to introduce Strange to Loki.”

Well, that was certainly a cause that Tony could get behind. But Loki wasn’t in the Tower and they had no way of knowing when he would be back, and Tony knew that he wasn’t going to be able to wait that long for a shot at putting Strange’s pompous ass in his place.

No matter. He was sure another opportunity would present itself soon, and if not… well, he’d just have to make do.

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So, really, things had been going well. They’d found the Time Stone in only a few days and despite Strange’s general irritating demeanour, they’d made a new ally. For the moment, Tony was quite happy upgrading satellites and building more suits and practising with the Space Stone, and everything was actually fairly quiet. Honestly, Tony should have been expecting that the quiet moment would be when everything once again went to shit.

It was a Monday, or maybe a Tuesday. Either way Loki had been gone for over a week and Tony was sitting in the living room, flicking through some blueprints for a new and improved Veronica when he was interrupted by someone pausing just outside the room and clearing their throat.

“Tony,” said Clint, taking a single, wary step through the doorway. “Is there a particular reason why Dummy is in the middle of the living room?”

“He was bored,” Tony said immediately, throwing in a shrug for good measure. “He spends his whole time in the workshop, and wanted to come out for a bit. After all he’s done for me, I thought—why not?”

“Okay,” said Clint, his words still slow and more than a little concerned—though whether that
concern was for his own wellbeing or Tony’s sanity remained to be seen. “And he’s holding a fire extinguisher because…?”

“Because it’s his and he likes it,” Tony said. “I never call you out on how you carry your bow around. Besides, you never know when a fire could break out, it’s better to be prepared.”

Dummy raised his claw in agreement. Unfortunately, the action also raised the extinguisher and Clint backed away with an uncharacteristically healthy sense of self-preservation. Then again, Clint had been on the receiving end of Dummy’s extinguisher before. They all knew to be cautious.

When Bruce wandered into the common floor a few minutes later to collect a cup of tea from the kitchen, he merely gave Dummy a cursory glance, gave his head a small, accepting shake, and then continued as normal. He, at least, knew better than to bother asking.

Tony simply continued to flick through the blueprints, enjoying the calm and smiling as Clint finally sat down on the couch as far away from Dummy as he possibly could. Yeah, it was quiet. It was nice, even, or as nice as things could be with the threat hanging over their heads.

It only took a few words to crack the illusion.

“Sir,” said JARVIS, his voice loud and urgent, cutting through the quiet and obliterating the tranquility. “Secretary Thaddeus Ross has entered the building.”

Then the unmistakable resonance of ceramic shattering on tile sounded from the kitchen, and Tony felt his blood run cold.
Unbidden guests are often welcomest

Chapter Summary

“Oh really?” said Peter, shrugging his shoulders and pairing a smirk with a raised eyebrow so perfectly that Tony was half worried he’d learned the trick from Natasha. “That’s impressive, I guess. But Dummy has bested several gods.”

Chapter Notes

this is the second time in this fic that I have used a Shakespeare quote for a chapter title (dear god what has happened, teenage me would be so mad) so I felt like I should acknowledge that fact, since I usually try to for quotes that are actually in the chapters.

Tony was on his feet in an instant, his StarkPad unceremoniously thrown aside to clatter against the floor.

“Send Steve to intercept him,” he said immediately, already heading toward the kitchen, toward Bruce.

“I’ll get Nat,” Clint called over his shoulder, running in the opposite direction.

When Tony rounded the corner of the kitchen, he found Bruce hunched over, his elbows on the counter and his hands over his eyes. The remains of a red-patterned mug lay scattered over the floor but Tony took no notice, letting his boots crunch the ceramic to nothing.

“Captain Rogers is meeting Secretary Ross in the lobby,” JARVIS said.

“You hear that, Brucie?” asked Tony, moving closer. “Steve’s on it.”

Bruce groaned, and pressed his hands even tighter over his eyes.

“You’re okay,” said Tony, patting Bruce’s arm lightly. “You’re calm.”

“I know you know that doesn’t help,” Bruce groaned, lowering his hands in order to glare. “But you’re right. I’m not going to turn green.”

“Good,” Tony sighed, gratified to see that Bruce’s eyes were their usual clear brown. “Now, I want you to go to your lab.”

“What?”

“Your lab,” Tony repeated. “Now.”

“I don’t need to be coddled,” Bruce snapped.

“I know,” said Tony. “But you don’t need to see him. Let me - let all of us - deal with this for you.”
Bruce continued to argue, but a few more mentions of friendship and a couple of skilfully applied guilt trips was all it took to get Bruce to move. After all, Tony knew that Bruce’s heart hadn’t been in the argument. He really hadn’t wanted to have to see Ross.

By the time Tony had managed to shove Bruce into the emergency stairwell, the elevator was opening and Steve was leading Ross into the living room, Clint and Natasha following behind.

“Stark,” said Ross, nodding cordially. His eyes were flickering over the room, searching.

“Ross,” said Tony, his voice cold.

In the middle of the living room Dummy beeped angrily, his fire extinguisher veering threateningly toward the Secretary of State.

“Stark,” Ross snapped, his body tensing. “Send that thing away.”

“No,” Tony said simply. “This is my home, and I’ll keep my bots where I want, thanks.”

“We’ll go to the conference room,” Steve sighed diplomatically, already moving to lead the way.

“Let’s make this quick, I have more important things to be doing,” Ross said as he followed. “And I will need the whole team.”

“JARVIS?” said Steve.

“Mr Maximoff is on his way, Captain,” said JARVIS. “ETA two minutes.”

“What about Spider-Man and Falcon?” asked Ross.

“They’re not official members,” said Tony, shaking his head as if in disappointment. “Falcon keeps avoiding his initiation.”

“He doesn’t actually believe that he needs to stand naked in a bowl of baked beans, you know,” Steve said, and despite the fact that Tony could only see the back of his head he could totally sense the exasperatedly fond eye-roll.

“Shame,” Clint sighed. “That would have been a sight.”

True to JARVIS’ word, Pietro did not take long and it was only a few minutes later that they were settled in the same conference room where they had once spent a day deciphering the Accords.

“And… Banner?” Ross asked, his eyes narrowing.

“He’s busy,” said Tony, matching Ross’ hard expression with a glare of his own. “Or do you really want me to call him up here?”

Ross’ only response was to stiffly open his briefcase, and Tony sagged a little with relief.

“After the events of the past few days,” Ross started, spreading a few papers over the table. “The Council has decided that your team needs a handler.”

“And you’re the one who got dumped with us?” Tony asked, a spike of unease already curling through his gut. “Surely there’s someone lower on the food-chain.”

Ross’ lips pulled up in a shark-like grin. “I volunteered.”
“Of course you did,” Tony sighed.

“We don’t need a babysitter,” Clint said.

“After the show that Stark put on, the Council has decided that you do,” said Ross. He shoved a few papers in their direction, gesturing for each of them to take one. “The Accords that all of you have signed stated that you must operate under supervision.”

“Yes,” Steve warily agreed. “We have informed the Council of all of our movements—“

“You’ve been very vigilant Captain, yes,” Ross interrupted. “However, Iron Man going rogue in the middle of a meeting has caused more than a few members of the Council to speak with concern. It is impossible for the Council to properly oversee your operations when you could so easily ignore their decision with little consequence.”

“You know that isn’t true,” Tony snapped. “We all know what will happen if we so much as sneeze on a politician’s shoes these days—“

“The Council promised us a measure of trust,” Natasha broke in, and it was less her words and more the kick under the table that cut off Tony’s budding rant. “Will they keep that promise?”

“We need to see that we have a reason to do so,” Ross started, and he looked likely to continue but was cut short.

“You still have my sister,” Pietro said, his expression blank though his anger was given away by the tremble in his tightly closed fists. “Is that not enough?”

“She is doing well in our care, a fact that I know you are well aware of,” Ross said calmly. “Do not accuse me nor the Council of anything there, boy. You know that both you and your sister are permitted to remain in the United States through your own pledge to help keep our country safe with the Avengers.”

Pietro’s expression cracked as he snapped— “I am not with the Avengers to protect only—“

“Do not even try to blackmail him,” said Tony, leaning forward over the table and cutting Pietro off before he could say something to make the situation worse. Pietro may not like him, but there was no way in hell that Tony could just stand by when someone was threatening a member of the team. Especially not when that person was Thaddeus fucking Thunderbolt Ross.

“If I ever begin to blackmail any of you, you’ll know it,” Ross said, still appearing unfazed with that slimy politician-pleasantry. “But I do not believe it will come to that. With the exception of your recent actions, Stark, the Avengers have all complied to the Accords easily and with respect. The Council still believes that you are due the trust that you were promised.” He inclined his head to Natasha, acknowledging her earlier question. “However, they do not believe it prudent to hold a meeting with one of you for every discussion. As such, from this point on, you will relay any concerns, requests, questions, or pertinent information that the Council need be privy to through me. I will, in turn, bring your words before the council, eliminating the need for face-to-face conferences for relatively minimal concerns.”

_Eliminating the need for clarity, you mean_, Tony thought with a frown. This was already sounding like it was about to become a scaled up and dangerous game of ‘telephone.’ Besides, hang on—minimal concern? Tony had been talking about Thanos.

“So we can’t even talk to them now?” Clint asked, almost rising in his seat and only pausing when Natasha put a hand on his arm.
“That’s not what he’s saying,” she said, glancing between Clint and Tony. “He’s just saying that we need to go to him first.”

“I’m now your first point of contact,” said Ross. “You talk to me first, as Agent Romanov said, and then I take your message to the Council. If it is then decided that a conference is required, it will be arranged.”

“So you’re an owl,” Clint muttered, but luckily for him, Steve spoke over his words and it seemed that Ross didn’t hear.

“But that means we don’t talk to them directly unless they think it necessary,” Steve said. “How can we cooperate and organise properly if we can’t speak with them? How will we communicate the validity and seriousness of a threat if we can’t give voice to it ourselves?”

“Exactly,” agreed Clint. “The whole point of the Accords was to increase communication.”

“It was only Stark talking to them before,” said Ross, his furrowed brow at odds with the sharp amusement in his gaze. “How is this different?”

Because you aren’t a member of the team. It was telling that every one of their expressions was saying it, though none of them were game enough to utter it aloud.

“How is this going to work, exactly?” asked Tony. “You’re the Secretary of State. If something big comes up, like, oh, I don’t know, another alien invasion, you’re surely going to have more important things to do than just play messenger between us and the UN.”

“We have yet to work out all of the kinks,” Ross replied.

“Of course you have,” Tony snorted. “And right in the middle of a crisis, too. Tell me, what are you planning to do when Thanos attacks?”

When Ross turned to Tony, his gaze narrowed and his piercing blue eyes were sharp as he seemed to consider Tony carefully. He didn’t look disbelieving, or even unconvinced— he was just… calculating, like he was entirely aware of the situation and was simply choosing the best play.

Which, to be brutally honest, was probably a good thing.

After a few very long moments that were probably stretched by Tony’s own imagination, the Secretary looked away and began to busy himself with packing up papers.

“I’m going to be in touch,” said Ross as he closed his briefcase, stood, and brushed down his suit. “As I said, everything you do needs to go through me, now. And I’ll be monitoring your movements, so should anything big happen, I’ll know.”

“You’re not putting cameras in my tower,” Tony snapped, getting to his feet so that he didn’t have to glare up at the guy. Well, Ross was still a fair bit taller, but he didn’t have to glare up quite so much at least.

“Of course not,” Ross said. “Who do you think I am? SHIELD? I’ll be using the same system as the Council were before, only with more diligence.”

That was something, at least.

“I’ll show you out,” said Natasha, already by the door. “I assume you’ll send JARVIS all the necessary contact details?”
Ross nodded, and then allowed her to lead him to the elevator.

“This… is not good,” Pietro said the moment Ross was out of earshot.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Clint snapped. Then he rounded on Tony. “This is why you should think before you act. Look at what you’ve done! How do you think Bruce is going to feel—“

“All of this just proves that what I did has got their attention,” Tony snapped. “Of course I’m worried about Bruce! Yeah, this would be better if it were anyone other than Ross, so no, it’s not a fantastic situation. But don’t you see? This means that they’re scared, now. They know something’s happening, and in that way, at least, this could turn in our favour.”

“How?” asked Clint. "I can’t see how this could ever—"

“No, Tony’s right,” said Steve. “They did more than just reprimand us, and that means that what Tony did has shaken them. And with Ross watching us now, he’ll be able to see for himself that we’re telling the truth about Thanos.”

“Not to mention that he is the Secretary of State,” Natasha pointed out. “Tony was right when he said that Ross would have more important things to do, and surely they all know that. I don’t think this is exactly what they’re selling it as– I think they don’t want to admit the truth in case it turns out that we are wrong. They don’t want to be accused by the rest of the world of preparing for aliens, even though we now know the threat is real after New York.” She shrugged. “Old habits die hard.”

“They’re trying to save face?” Pietro asked, tilting his head in confusion. “They’re just going in circles. Surely more would be achieved if they spoke plainly?”

“Oh, my sweet summer child,” Tony sighed, turning his eyes to the ceiling.

“So, you’re saying that the Council does think that something big is coming, and that we’re their best line of defence, and that’s why they sent a big shot like Ross here?” Clint summarised, his brow scrunching in thought.

“Exactly,” Tony agreed. “And it doesn’t seem like he thinks we’re lying. He just wants to see for himself before he puts his own reputation on the line.”

“But for now, we’re still on our own,” Clint concluded.

“Not entirely,” said Steve, a smile starting to form across his lips. “Just before Ross arrived I heard back from Sam. He’s managed to find Ant-Man.”

“Ant-Man?” Tony groaned. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Unfortunately not,” Steve said with a grin. “Sam tracked him down through a criminal network of gossipers. It sounds like he’s interested in helping us.”

“I found Daredevil,” Pietro piped up, probably not wanting to be outdone. They all turned to him with surprise, and he shrugged. “What? You were all saying that we should be recruiting help, so I thought—“

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Natasha asked.

“Because Daredevil told him to piss off,” Clint said with a laugh. “He did, didn’t he?”

“He knows we’ve asked now, though,” said Steve with a sigh. “And he knows about Thanos?”

“I tried to tell him,” said Pietro. “He says that we Avengers can deal with it.”

“Of course he did,” Tony snorted. “He’s always been a bit dark, and uncaring of anything not in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“He doesn’t have powers, Tony,” said Steve. “He can’t cover as much ground as—”

“Neither do I,” Tony pointed out. “In fact, about half our team don’t have powers, if we’re including Wilson.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Natasha. “If he doesn’t want to help we’re not going to make him, but if he does— he knows where to find us.”

“We’ll see,” Tony muttered. “But back to the new recruit we apparently do have— do we get to meet this ‘Ant-Man’?!” And man, but what was it with the bug themed names? If the guy ended up as an Avenger it would bring their tally to three. That was way too high a proportion.

“Sam says he’ll bring him to the Tower tomorrow,” said Steve. “I’m sure JARVIS will be able to get some more information on him before that.”

“J?” Tony prompted.

“It’ll be but the work of a moment, Sir,” JARVIS said.

“JARVIS, you’re the absolute best,” Tony praised.

———

The first thing JARVIS found was that Ant-Man was once a hacktivist, and Tony had immediately grinned. Surely they’d get along, right?

Then, of course, JARVIS found that the guy was involved with Hank Pym. Great. This was going to be so much fun.

———

When Peter had said that he needed help and asked whether he could head over to the Tower that afternoon after school, Tony had immediately agreed. After all, the kid deserved some support after what he’d done for Tony at the UN, and Tony would have helped him anyway, to be honest. Besides, Peter had sounded nervous, and anything serious enough to warrant that—

Well, okay, Peter was always nervous, unless he was wearing his mask.

But when Peter came in, happily greeted Dummy and the few Avengers that were also scattered through the living room and then asked for help with his homework—

Just... no.

“I do not understand why this has fallen on me,” Tony complained. “I haven’t done English since high school, and that was a really long time ago.”

“Not that long,” said Peter.

“Flattery isn’t going to help you, Pete,” said Tony. “It doesn’t change the fact that I haven’t analysed
a poem since the 80s, and even then I bullshitted my way through since I already knew I’d be accelerated on the merit of my maths and—“

“Mr Stark!” Peter snapped. “You don’t have to help me analyse a poem!”

“I don’t have to do anything, I am way too old for homework,” Tony pouted.

“Please, Mr Stark,” Peter pleaded. “You said you’d help.”

“Yeah, and I’m totally regretting—“

“I just need to interview you,” Peter said. “The project is to find someone we admire and interview them, and then write a short biography—“

“There’s already a heap of my biographies out there kid, and I’m pretty sure at least one of them has even been approved by my lawyers,” Tony said. “You don’t need to interview me for that.” He did his best to hide the fact that Peter’s words made him feel like there was a balloon inflating in his chest, but the snicker that came from the direction of one of the other couches let him know that he had failed. “Look,” he said. “I’m flattered, but surely there’s someone else you could rope into this?”

“Well,” Peter said with a dramatic sigh. “My first choice was going to be either Loki or Thor since they’re actual gods, but since they aren’t here—“

“As if,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “My life is way more interesting.”

“And then I thought about Cap, since he’s a real life legend and he’s actually in all our history textbooks—“

“I bet I’m in your science textbooks,” Tony cut in.

“Not as much as Dr Banner,” Peter said with an entirely straight face. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should just go and ask—“

“Oh shut up kid, and ask me the damn questions,” Tony growled. When Peter’s face lit up and he went to speak again, Tony held up a hand. “And I know that was contradictory. Just get your work out. Jesus.”

Peter snickered, but bent down to pull a crumpled sheaf of papers from his backpack.

“Right,” he said. “First question.”

“Wait.” It was Steve who had spoken, gesturing to the centre of the room to where a few bright orange sparks were forming.

“Not again,” Clint groaned, but Tony merely smiled.

“Just wait for it,” he said. “And, um. Everyone should maybe back away.”

Natasha, the only other occupant of the room, frowned in confused curiosity, but before she could voice a question Dummy was charging forward with his fire extinguisher, finally moving from the spot he had vigilantly guarded all day and aiming directly at the target Tony had described to him that morning.

“STARK!”

All Tony really got was a glimpse of Strange’s angry face as he wiped white foam out of his B grade
goatee before the magic cape was flying toward his bot, silent but full of vengeance as it threw itself over Dummy and wrapped around his claw. Tony worried for a moment but Dummy battled fiercely, squealing angrily as he thrashed under the thick red material.

“Ten bucks on Dummy,” said Clint.

“The Cloak of Levitation has bested many dark sorcerers,” Strange replied, crossing his arms smugly.

“Oh really?” said Peter, shrugging his shoulders and pairing a smirk with a raised eyebrow so perfectly that Tony was half worried he’d learned the trick from Natasha. “That’s impressive, I guess. But Dummy has bested several gods.”

Strange snorted.

“All right, Parker’s with me,” said Clint, high fiving the kid. “Anyone want to back the cape?”

“It’s not a—” Strange started, but Steve cut over him.

“I wouldn’t bet against Dummy,” he said, shaking his head.

“No one’s going to take your bet, Clint,” Natasha agreed.

“This is ridiculous,” Strange said. “Your robot is enthusiastic, but it’s not going to beat an ancient magical artefact.”

No sooner than Strange had finished his sentence, Dummy let out a screech that was higher pitched than the others and then the cloak went flying across the room, accompanied by an explosion of white foam.

“Dummy, not again,” Steve groaned, staring at the dripping white bot in exasperation. “We had to get entirely new carpet, last time.”

“It’s not like it matters, Stark has the money for it,” said Clint, wiping a splotch of foam from his shoulder with an absent flick. “And besides, I totally called that. Nice work, little bot!”

Dummy, who had lowered his foam-covered claw in shame at Steve’s reprimand, looked up and beeped happily at Clint.

“You totally showed him who was boss,” said Peter, dancing forward to give the bot a splattering high five. Then he turned to Strange with a frown. “Is it a him? Or a her? Or something else entirely?”

“You know, I’ve never really asked,” Strange admitted.

“Well, that’s rude,” Peter muttered under his breath.

The cloak looked a little sheepish as it pulled itself away from the couch it had been thrown behind when Dummy had managed to explode the extinguisher, and then it slowly began to float forward. Dummy beeped and waved his now empty claw with a clear message of ‘get back or else’, the broken fire extinguisher discarded now that it had done its work. But the cloak took no notice of the warning and continued to move until it floated just before the angry bot, lifting one dark red corner and holding it out to Dummy in an unmistakable gesture.

Even Dummy could recognise a handshake.
However, the bot was both too riled up and entirely too curious for his own good, and instead of shaking the cloak’s ‘hand’ as would have been polite (honestly, Tony had raised him better than that, it had to be Loki’s influence), Dummy poked at the damp red material before trailing his claw further along it, humming interestingly as he prodded and grasped and just generally explored the new… creature. The cloak used its other corner to swat at Dummy in retaliation, and then they began a playful exchange of flicks and pokes that was so far from what they had been doing earlier that Tony could do little else but gape.

“Oh for god’s sake,” Strange said, though his voice was weirdly fond. “Get back over here, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

The cloak gave Dummy one last teasing flick before flying back to Strange and attaching itself to his shoulders. Of course, that just meant that Strange was smeared with even more white foam, and Tony was almost sure that the cloak had done it out of spite.

Strange just sighed in the exact same way that Steve did when one of Tony’s experimental kitchen appliances exploded, and wiped some of the foam off with the edge of his robes, though they were hardly any better from the initial attack.

“Why are you even here?” Tony took the opportunity to ask. “You just keep turning up out of the blue—“

“I am a part of this team, am I not?” Strange asked. “If we’re to work together—“

“No,” said Clint. “You’re not joining the Avengers!”

“Seconded,” Tony said quickly.

“I don’t want to join the Avengers,” Strange snapped. “But like it or not, if we’re going to protect the planet then I am going to have some say in how we do so. I’m not leaving the Earth’s welfare in the hands of a glorified college fraternity!”

“Excuse me?” said Natasha, raising a deadly eyebrow.

“You honestly can’t tell me you disagree,” Strange said to her.

And Natasha, the absolute traitor, only gave it less than a second’s thought before she shrugged and nodded in agreement.

“He has every right,” Steve said to them, no doubt sensing another brewing squabble. “And besides, the more input we have, the better.”

“We’re not even making plans,” Clint whined. “He’s probably just trying to see what powers we have.”

“Don’t you accuse me of that,” Strange snapped. “Stark was the one asking about my portals.”

Clint snorted. Then giggled.

“Oh, shut up,” Tony said. Just because he’d accidentally ended up in the penguin enclosure at the Central Park Zoo the day before and had flown home smelling of fish did not mean that the others had the right to laugh. They couldn’t teleport at all. “Although, Strange, speaking of—“

“I almost died when I was learning to make a portal,” Strange snapped. “I would not be interested in teaching you, even if I thought that a Tony Stark with the ability to travel anywhere in an instant was
even close to approaching a good idea.”

“Wish Loki and Thor had thought about that,” Clint muttered under his breath.

“You have to admit that the entertainment value is high, though,” Peter replied, his tone both equally as low and equally as audible.

Clint shrugged noncommittally, like he agreed but was too prideful to say so.

“Fine,” Tony said. It’s not like he needed the help, anyway. Loki would be back, soon. He and Thor were already going after the Aether, after all. “But you have to remember that we’ve been doing this for a while, now. I know for a fact that you only stopped being a doctor some two years ago.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not wrong,” Strange pointed out. “And you do realise that between the two of us, only one has managed to save the world without making a mess.”

“Arrogant asshole,” Tony grumbled.

“Pot,” Natasha taunted. “Besides, I’ll be glad to have another face around here every now and then. You do remember our many conversations about needing the help?”

“At this rate we might as well just put an ad on Craigslist,” Tony groused. When Natasha’s taunting expression hardened to a glare, he sighed. “Fine,” he said again. “Strange, I guess you’re welcome to show up again. I’ll try not to let you get attacked next time.”

“I didn’t mind the arrow so much, but just please, don’t set your insane bot on me again,” Strange groaned.

“I make no promises,” said Tony, and when Dummy raised his claw in smug agreement, he took great joy in the way that Strange took a small step back.

———

Strange continued to show up unannounced, sometimes with the excuse of exchanging information or planning for the best way to get organised when Thanos inevitably attacked, and sometimes just to steal dinner. (Supreme Magician probably wasn’t a job title that paid well, after all.) And to be honest, Tony probably wouldn’t have minded. After all, he had the funds, Strange’s logic was sound, and the wizard always showed up wearing the Eye of Agamotto around his neck. Tony would be lying if he said that seeing it every now and then didn’t keep his heart rate down a little. Honestly, there was nothing really wrong with Strange’s visits– even Clint had begun to warm up to him in a reluctant and mostly sarcastic manner.

Except… The way that Strange kept popping in, appearing with no warning just to complain about the Avengers’ general way of doing things or to steal food or, one time, to join in on watching the movie that Pietro finally got to pick was bringing up memories of how Tony and Loki first became friends. It wasn’t like Tony had ever forgotten what happened, of course. It had been a few years since Loki had appeared in Tony’s mansion and they had argued over what was and was not appropriate to cook on the kitchen stove, but the memories remained as clear as crystal. The problem was that Tony missed that time– that he ached for the days when his biggest issue was whether or not his couch would survive through the night and when he and Loki could simply be without needing to worry about Mad Titans or sorcerers or even Avengers.

But it was… ugh, it wasn’t even all that. He missed all the little things, like how he could make a joke and know already exactly which laugh he would get in return, and he missed enjoying every chortle, snicker or snort. He missed being able to wake up in the morning and feel the press of
another body against his own, often with limbs wrapped together all in uncomfortable twists that made his joints crack but which just made him feel secure and loved. He missed the way Loki would scrunch up his nose when Tony drank his fourth cup of coffee in an hour, or the way that Loki would snap and snarl at everyone and everything the moment that he began to get even the slightest bit tired. Tony missed the little touches and the soft smiles and the brushes of fingers over skin that he never really did consciously, but that almost made the tips of his fingers tingle now that he couldn’t. He hadn’t had much opportunity to miss another person so deeply before, to miss them so viscerally that even while he knew, really, that he was fine and still an entirely functional human being, everything just seemed that little bit colder without Loki’s sharp smirks to brighten it all up.

He could tune it out most of the time but it never went away, and it only took the smallest of things to remind him of just why everything was a little bit more uninteresting than usual. He would feel fine, for a while, but then Tony only had to see an old book sitting on the coffee table, or brush his fingers across a green tunic tucked into his dresser, or watch as Dummy paused by Loki’s bench in the workshop and it all came flooding back in again. Generally he could pause, sigh, and push it away again, but other times it was harder. Sometimes, Tony needed more than just a moment.

Tony sighed and leaned back against the couch, closing his eyes. His fingers were turning a black mug over in his hands, the words ‘I failed Muggle Studies’ scrawled across it in a bright emerald cursive. He’d rescued it from the kitchen on the common floor a few minutes earlier, when he’d caught Clint jesting about how funny it would be to lend the mug to Strange.

Peter had bought Loki the mug a few months back as a joke, but Loki had loved it, and it was his go to whenever he wanted a cup of tea. When Tony had roughly snatched it from Clint’s grasp the archer had immediately stated that he was only joking, but Tony had simply stalked away, going straight for the elevator.

As he tightened his grip on the ceramic, Tony reprimanded himself for being so bloody sentimental. It was just a stupid mug, bought off Etsy for less than ten dollars. It was silly, but at the same time it was more than just that, more than just a cheap mug because… because it was Loki’s.

Tony was coping, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t have a moment of weakness.

The sudden hiss of magical sparks caused Tony's eyes to snap open, and he was pulled out of his musings as yet another fucking portal began to burn brightly before him. And for god's sake, it was right in the middle of his penthouse this time, not down in the common room where it had been agreed Strange could appear.

“For the love of– What now, Strange?” Tony snapped, still cradling the mug in his hands as he glared bitterly at the glowing orange portal in the middle of the room. It was still irritating to the highest degree, and Tony swore that he too would learn how to aim his portals with such precision, even if it killed him. “This had better be important—"

“Sorry to interrupt,” Strange snarked back, and Tony could have sworn that the wizard’s eyes had been rolling before he even entered the room. “I just thought you might like to be made aware of the aliens that are currently attacking the city.”

Tony peered through the still burning portal, his eyes widening as he saw the chaos on the other side.

“Oh,” he said, carefully placing Loki’s mug down on the coffee table as JARVIS immediately began the call to Assemble. “Yeah, okay. That's fair.”
The most potent instrument

Chapter Summary

“Yeah, the spaceship totally ruined the vibe of my field trip,” Peter sighed.

Chapter Notes

Full disclosure, I've only seen Infinity War (and Ant-Man, for that matter) a grand total of one time, so if any characterisations I'm unfamiliar with are a bit off I apologise.

If Tony had to pick his favourite thing about being an Avenger, it would be this. Not the screams, or the threat of invasion, or the general destruction of property that littered the streets with chunks of concrete and metal as the large, doughnut shaped spaceship seemed to pull at pieces of buildings and vehicles from all over the city. But he loved flying through the air with the taste of danger on the tip of his tongue, flipping past obstacles in the sky with an urgency that no training exercise could replicate. He loved the adrenaline and he loved the sheer thrill of the flight, and it was a feeling that he knew even the more difficult fights wouldn’t diminish. Flying just settled into his bones, it felt natural, like he was born to sail through skies with nothing to support him but the fruit of his own ingenuity.

And with the new nanotech suit that just fit over his body like a second skin, with none of the pinching or uncomfortable movements of the old designs, he truly did feel like he was simply soaring under his own power, and the sensation was utterly euphoric.

Yes, flying was definitely on his list of favourite activities and something he was going to continue to enjoy for as long as he remained able– which, thanks to Loki, was going to be a long time yet.

If Tony had to pick his least favourite thing, well—

“Tony Stark! I can’t believe what you’re trying to do! The only time I have ever been so insulted would be when your father tried to buy my work for a fraction of its worth, and for military purposes!”

—the way that old strained acquaintances who had, in the past, been entirely content to ignore him just seemed to crawl out of the woodwork in droves made it at least into his top three.

First Strange, and now this.

“Yes, hi, nice to talk to you again after so long,” Tony said distractedly, spinning in mid-air and only just managing to avoid what looked like half a taxi as it crashed through the streets. “I’m a little busy right now, will you hold?”

“No, I will not hold! I can’t believe you had the audacity to try and poach my technology, after everything that you have said and done—“
“Hank, I’m not trying to poach—“

“That’s Dr Pym to you, Stark,” Pym spat.

“Dr Pym,” said Tony. “Listen, I just— okay, hang on a sec.” Tony dived hard, ignoring the affronted chatter in his ear as he landed heavily above a little girl and her mother, and protected them with his body from a falling chunk of concrete.

“Iron Man!” The girl squealed excitedly, her tear stained face brightening as she looked up into Tony’s gold faceplate.

“Thank you,” her mother said. “Mr Stark, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, giving them a quick salute before jumping back into the air.

“Welcome for what?” Pym growled in his ear. “Look, I know Scott’s excitable and he makes his own decisions, but that’s my technology, you have no right, and you are certainly not welcome to—“

“As hard as it is to believe, that actually wasn’t directed to you,” said Tony. “Come on, Hank, we used to be friends! You taught me how to build my first particle accelerator.”

“That was before your father—“

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Tony snapped, rounding a corner a little too hard in his irritation and nearly crashing into the side of a Bank of America. “Howard was an asshole. Trust me, I’m the last person who needs to hear that lecture.”

Then another voice broke through on Tony’s comms, interrupting Pym’s newest addition to his rant.

“Okay, I’m here, just getting into position, I need a high vantage point. Iron Man, where the hell are you?”

There was a pause.

“It seems that you’re needed elsewhere,” Pym eventually said, his voice low. “But we aren’t done here. I’ll be in contact.”

“Yes, thank you Hank,” said Tony distractedly. “Nice chat. Hawkeye, I’m just rounding up Lexington, most of the civilians here have found shelter. Find me a new hot spot.”

“To hell with you, Stark,” Pym snapped, and then his icon vanished from the HUD.

“You know, it’s a shame,” said Tony. “I used to look up to that guy.”

“I’m sure you were far more tolerable as a child, Sir.”

“Thanks, J. You always know how to make me feel better.”

“Who was that?” asked Clint. “He sounded great.”

“You would think that,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “Never mind him. Have you got anything for me?”

“Yeah, the ship’s moving,” Clint said.

“Yes, I got that,” Tony groused. It had been hard to miss. “Have we seen any movement on actual
“I’ve seen one,” said Sam. “Big, ugly brute, tearing up Lower Manhattan.”

“And there’s a skinny weird looking dude on 3rd,” said Clint. “Haven’t seen any others.”

“I haven’t seen any at all,” Tony replied. “Okay, so it seems the debris and the civilians are the priority, but someone needs to focus on the hostiles. I’ll—“

“Hulk’s gone downtown,” Clint interrupted. “And I’ve got eyes on the other one, he’s not doing a whole lot. Iron Man, you should probably stay on civilians.”

“Roger that,” Tony agreed.

“Speaking of, Cap’s on the scene,” said Clint, and Tony rolled his eyes. That joke was old years ago. “I see him talking to some police. Bout time the NYPD pulled their weight—“

“They’re not equipped for this, Clint, leave them to look after the evacuation,” said Sam. “Who else have we got?”

“I’m here,” said Pietro. “Clearing out offices.”

“Good work, keep going,” said Clint. “I’ll let you know if anything else comes up.”

“Iron Man, I’ve just heard from the authorities, they need help in Union Square,” Steve said over the comms, his conversation with the police clearly coming to an end. “The entrance is blocked, and people are pouring out from the subway. They’re worried the crowd will start to be crushed in the panic.”

“They’re probably safer in the subway,” Tony said. “If the trains haven’t started moving, then the magnetic field isn’t reaching that far underground—“

“All that will be irrelevant if they’re crushed, Tony!” Natasha snapped, joining the party. “Get over there!”

“Yes Ma’am,” Tony said, shooting a mocking salute toward Avengers Tower before flying in the opposite direction. He could see a quinjet just taking off from the landing pad— that was probably a good idea, they needed a bird’s eye view, and Natasha had killer aim with the big guns.

It felt odd to be flying in the wrong direction. In the first few moments of the fight, it seemed that the spaceship was hovering more on the southern end of the island— but since Tony had left the Tower it had begun to fly further north. Tony had his suspicions as to why that was, but he hoped to god that he was wrong.

“Clint, I’m going to pick you up,” said Natasha. “You’re a sitting duck over there, and the fight’s more widespread than you can see.”

“Don’t come in from the left,” Clint advised. “The skinny one is having a bit of a party with some buses. They’re flying.”

“I’m on that,” said Strange.

“Okay,” said Tony as he shot past the Empire State. “Who the hell gave Strange access to our comms?”

“I did,” said Sam. “Come on, guys. The wizard’s an asset.”
“The sorcerer prefers to be referred to by name,” Strange snapped. “Honestly.”

“The wizard could be doing more to help,” Clint snapped back. “You coming over here to deal with this freak, or not?”

Tony tuned out the prattling as he made it to Union Square, immediately identifying the problem. There was a build up of debris all around the two 14th street entrances to the subway located in the centre of the square. It had probably become wedged in the stairwell when the direction of the pull had changed, as the spaceship shifted from hovering over Greenwich Village to heading for Avengers Tower. While there were people streaming from the smaller stairwells along the outside buildings, Tony could see how the blocked main exits would cause a problem for those underground, especially with panic involved. He needed to act fast.

Simply blasting away the debris would be quick and effective, but it was far too risky. So he hovered over one exit for a moment, considering his options.

“JARVIS,” he said, coming to a speedy decision. “I’m going to need some back up.”

“I am already ahead of you, Sir,” said JARVIS. True to his word, Tony heard the telltale whirr of repulsors before he could even turn. Right behind him, four Iron Legionnaires were hovering to attention, waiting to be given their instructions.

“Thanks, J,” Tony said fondly.

“You’re welcome, Sir. As always.”

With the extra hands, Tony was able to have JARVIS steady some of the larger pieces of debris while he hit the weaker areas with concentrated blasts. Tony considered having JARVIS warn the civilians trapped below by hacking into their phones, but he thought that might only increase the panic and their rush to get away from the blocked exit, so instead he opted to work loudly so that the people would know to be ready.

He had a bit of a close call when one particularly heavy chunk of concrete threatened to fall into the stairwell, but JARVIS sacrificed a legionnaire and pushed the boulder away. The legionnaire was crushed under the weight, nothing more than a sparking arm visible under the concrete, but the entrance was cleared and people were finally able to spill out into the square.

There were yells of thanks mingled with screams as the civilians greeted the sunlight, their tone entirely decided by whether they saw the red and gold armour or the hulking spacecraft first. JARVIS hurried them all along toward the buildings, and Tony turned to the next clotted exit.

“Okay, said Tony. “Let’s get the other one.”

“Iron Man!” Clint snapped, his voice crackling in over the comms, breaking through the mute JARVIS had placed while Tony had been concentrating. “Hulk is struggling with a guy in Washington Square Park, he needs back up, ASAP!”

“On it,” said Tony, already turning to head in that direction. “JARVIS, you can take the other exit, right?”

“I believe so, Sir,” the AI responded.

Tony grinned, and continued his flight. But then he paused.

“Wait. Did you say Hulk is struggling?” He asked incredulously. “Hulk?”
“Alien’s real big, Stark,” said Clint. “Be careful, will you?”

Tony’s lips pressed into a grim line as he charged forward once more. “Coming from you, that says a whole lot more about the situation than I think I need to know.”

“He’s impulsive, Tony, and he seems to rely on his strength,” said Natasha. “Hit him hard. Everyone else— I’m in position,” she added, clearly referencing a plan that Tony had missed. “Steve, are you ready?”

Cap’s response was little more than a groan.

“He’s ready,” said Pietro, a bit out of breath but otherwise sounding like he was in high spirits. “Falcon and I are watching his back.”

“I’m watching both of your backs,” Sam muttered.

“Okay, let’s do this,” said Clint.

“You sure you don’t need me?” Tony asked. “Sounds like you’ve got a bit of an operation going on —“

“One of these guys is telekinetic,” Clint said. “We can’t get close, but Strange is going to cage him. We just have to push him into a corner.”

“There’s still only the two hostiles so far,” Sam added. “The ship itself is causing the most damage, but these guys are clearly after something.”

“Get Hulk,” Natasha said. “We’ve got the wizard.”

“Strange is a wizard,” argued Clint. “This guy is more of a…”

“I am a sorcerer,” Strange growled.

“Well, he’s not that either,” said Clint. “But he looks a bit like the head alien out of Lilo & Stitch.”

“Man, I hate that movie,” Tony groaned.

“Only ‘cause you cried,” Clint taunted.

“We all cried,” Natasha snapped. “Now stop gossiping, we have a job to do.”

Trusting that his teammates had the magically-inclined alien under control, Tony took to the skies once more, the flight less of a joy ride and more of a merciless charge through the skies as he headed to help his friend.

The sight that met him at Washington Square Park was not a pretty one. The Hulk and his opponent had torn up a lot of the ground and the famous, two hundred year old arch lay scattered in broken pieces— shattered, no doubt, by the impact of a large, hulking body.

The Hulk himself was already smattered with dark bruises all along his abdomen, and Tony winced at the sight. For something to have caused that much damage…

Not wanting to waste any more time, Tony threw himself into the fight, blasting immediately at the alien’s own abdomen with a full powered repulsor, satisfied as the alien stumbled back.

“Yeah, that’s how it feels,” he growled, and then was hit hard in the side by a flying fist. Damn, but
for his size the guy was *fast*.

“No hurt Tin Man!” Hulk roared, standing from where the alien had pushed him into the ground and charging forward. The alien stood strong and raised his heavy fist, not even bothering to lift his hammer as Hulk came closer—

Then a white strand of webbing wrapped around the fist, causing the alien to look up in confusion.

“Oh no you don’t!” Peter yelled from his position atop a tree, yanking hard on the web and laughing as the unexpected tug caused the alien to punch himself in the face.

Tony snorted at the childish, but truthfully effective strategy, and used the distraction to slip under the alien’s guard and catch him unawares with a blast to the side of the head. That made the alien swing around in anger, only to be met with a swipe from the angry Hulk. The alien snarled again but before he could retaliate, he was distracted one more by a web catching on his shoulder.

“Hey, big guy,” Peter called. “Have you got a name? I’d like to know what to call you when I tell my friends about how we beat you later.”

The alien snarled and charged forward, swatting at Peter with his hammer. The kid nimbly danced out of the way with a few well aimed webs.

“Growly, is that it?” Peter asked. “You want us to call you growly?” He dodged another swat with the hammer, and Tony managed to catch the weapon with a blast at the top of its swing. The alien didn’t lose his grip but he was forced backward, straight into Hulk’s waiting grasp.

“Hulk smash,” Hulk snarled, gripping the alien’s hammer tightly and flinging him to the ground. This time, the weapon fell from the alien’s hand, and Hulk took great joy in hurling the hammer away down the street. Tony winced as he heard it crash, but had no time to dwell on the further damage, for the alien was already charging once more. Hulk met him in what looked like a rugby tackle, and Tony took the moment to hover near Peter, who was now hanging off a lamppost.

“So, what’s this guy’s problem, Mr Stark?” Peter asked.

“He’s from space,” said Tony, shrugging. “Couldn’t tell you much beyond that, to be honest, but I get the feeling that he’s not exactly friendly.”

“Yeah, the spaceship totally ruined the vibe of my field trip,” Peter sighed.

Tony stopped. “You’re not telling me you ran away from a field trip?” he asked, exasperated. “Your teacher is going to be— kid, your Aunt—“

“It’s all good, Ned’s running interference,” said Peter reassuringly.

“This is the same Ned that hid your capture-the-flag flag in a Lego Death Star, right?” asked Tony, definitely not reassured.

“…yeah.”

“Of course it is.” A loud crash, the sound of splitting wood and a tooth-shattering roar reminded Tony of the situation, and he shook the daunting prospect of having to deal with an angry Aunt May out of his mind. “Okay, kid,” he said. “Here’s the plan.”

Tony went in first, his repulsors bright and at their highest setting. Without his hammer the alien didn’t have much of a reach, and Tony could easily avoid his swatting fists while keeping up regular
retaliatory blasts. He wouldn’t have managed it for long, however, except for Peter swinging in and
throwing webbing over the alien’s eyes. The creature snarled and roared and pulled at the webbing
with his hands, and Peter used that to web together his wrists before adding layer upon layer of the
stuff. Hulk contributed to the fight with a jovial roar of his own, punching the alien hard on the top of
his head, sending him to the ground. Hulk hit him a few more times, far past what was necessary to
knock him unconscious and Tony was about to intervene when Hulk turned around and promptly sat
down on the alien’s broad chest.

“Hulk win,” he said solidly, before giving Tony and Peter a firm nod.

“Sure did,” said Peter. “That was fun.”

Tony might have worried that too much exposure to the Avengers had corrupted the poor kid, but he
was more focused on what they could do with the alien.

There was no way they could restrain him. The alien had the same strength as the Hulk, but even the
‘Hulk-proof’ materials Tony used in the Tower and that SHIELD had once used for their Hulk
cage were only good for a blow or two. They couldn’t hold this alien, not from the moment that he
regained consciousness. And that would not be long– even with all of the blows to his head, the alien
was already beginning to stir.

Really, there was only one option– and although it was hard to swallow, Tony knew it was
necessary.

The easiest, cleanest, and probably kindest method, however, was annoyingly still beyond Tony’s
grasp. So, grudgingly, he reconnected to the comms.

“Strange, we could use one of your portals, buddy,” Tony said. He had doubts as to whether the
wizard would come through, but no sooner than when he had finished his sentence a bright orange
portal sparked into existence.

It was, of course, on the completely wrong side of the park, but the square was small enough that
Strange immediately noted his mistake and stepped out of a second portal beside Tony in a mere
instant. He looked down to the web-trussed alien squished under Hulk’s impressive buttocks and
raised his eyebrows in a manner that Tony assumed was impressed.

“Space?” Strange asked.

“Yeah,” said Tony, nodding absently. “I was thinking space.”

After that, it was only a simple matter to have Strange open one more portal, and Hulk was only too
happy to utilise his throwing arm once more and hurl the bound alien straight out into the open void.

Tony, having experience with what it was like to float in open space, nearly felt sorry for the guy. But
then he remembered that, for whatever reason, the alien had attacked Tony’s home. He had
attacked Tony’s friends, and if by sending him out to space meant that he would never have that
chance again–

Well.

The Council probably wasn’t going to be impressed, either way. Maybe Tony would be able to
blame it on Strange.

“Good work, team!” Peter said.
“Hulk smash puny alien,” Hulk growled, glaring with hate toward the spot where the guy had vanished.

“You did good, buddy,” said Tony, his faceplate melting away as he pat his green friend absently on the leg. “Thanks.”

“I’m going back to help the others,” said Strange. “Stark, you should probably help here.” He gestured to where a few civilians were beginning to peek out from the buildings they had sheltered in during the attack, smartphones at the ready. “They’re going to need your help.”

“Sure, doc,” said Tony. Then he pointed a finger in Strange’s direction. “But only because I was going to anyway, not because I’m doing what you say.”

Somewhere behind him, Peter giggled, but Tony ignored him, preferring instead to pull a face at Strange’s back while the wizard opened yet another stupid portal. Goddamnit.

The moment the portal closed, Tony turned back to Hulk, who was poking absently at his side. Peter was trying to get him to stop, pulling in vain at Hulk’s forearm.

“You can’t poke a bruise, you’ll make it worse,” Peter was saying, his tone a bit whiney in that caring way that Tony had once heard before when Peter had tried to stop him from mixing coffee with Red Bull. (It was a science experiment, one that he still planned on performing soon. Preferably before Loki returned.) “Come on, Hulk, we should find a freezer in one of these restaurants, get you some ice.”

“He’ll be fine, Peter,” Tony said. “He’s survived worse.”

That, of course, was not exactly a comforting thought— guaranteed recovery or not, Hulk had still been injured.

“Hulk fine,” said Hulk, pushing Peter away gently with his free hand. “Spider leave Hulk be.”

“You should rest,” Peter insisted.

Tony sighed and was honestly about to take Peter’s side when the comms crackled, and Tony’s priorities were immediately reshuffled.

“Oh, crap!” Tony heard Clint yell. “There’s two more! Iron Man, I said come in!”

“We’ve fought and won against more than three aliens at a time before, keep going!” Steve shouted back.

“I’ve got the one with the horns,” said Sam. “Just let me—“

“No—!”

The comms cut off abruptly, and Tony felt like a bucket of ice water had been thrown over his head and had begun to trickle down his spine. He’d muted the comms when he was focusing on the big alien, and JARVIS had clearly only relinked them when Clint had called out for Tony specifically.

But then for them to cut out like that—

Something was seriously wrong.

“Guys?” he asked.
Hulk looked down at Tony worriedly, and Tony nodded. “Yeah, big guy,” he said. “We need to go and help them.”

A single, firm jerk of his head denoted Hulk's agreement before he headed off, his bounding footsteps leaving tremors in his wake, his injury easily forgotten. Tony’s faceplate crawled back over his face as he prepared to go as well, but he was stopped by a small voice to his left.

“Mr Stark?”

Tony looked over to see Peter, his own mask in place but his nervousness nonetheless easy to spot.

“Yeah, Pete?” he asked, keeping his voice calm.

“What’s going on?”

It was a difficult question to answer, given that Tony had no idea and he was loath to learn the truth himself. But before he could even try, another voice cut through the quiet of the broken square.

“Your friends have fallen for the oldest trick in the book.”

Tony tried to turn to see who had spoken but found that he was unable to, and a quick glance down proved that the concrete of the path had swallowed his feet, anchoring him firmly to the ground. Peter gasped loudly and seemed to ready his webs, but Tony stopped him with a snap.

“Kid, move,” Tony said. “JARVIS, give me thrust.”

JARVIS complied with a hot burst from the repulsors at Tony’s feet and the concrete cracked, but Tony shot up no more than a few inches before some invisible force held him in place.

“I am Ebony Maw, child of Thanos,” said the creature, moving forward on lithe strides with his hands raised in a gesture that was unfortunately recognisable– a stance that seemed consistent with magic users, no matter where they came from. “And you have something that belongs to my father.”

Oh, shit.

“Mr Stark!” Peter yelled, and Tony watched worriedly as he swung around from the tree he had leapt to at Tony’s earlier order and flew toward the alien, clearly aiming for a kick. But Ebony Maw swatted him away with a single flick of his hand. There was no light show– no shimmer of orange like when Strange used a portal; no flash of red that Tony would always associate with Wanda Maximoff; and no glowing green that accompanied everything Loki did. The alien simply moved his hand and an object (in this case, Peter) responded to his will, with no apparent magical interference involved in the process. It just was.

“That’s hardly fair,” Tony complained. “How are you doing that?” he asked, curious to the end– and also hoping to keep Maw’s attention away from the dangerously persistent kid. “Is it something your species can do? Or is it a power that’s just yours?”

“Oh, I never fight fair,” the alien mocked, leaning in close toward Tony’s covered face, his lipless mouth opening into a cruel sneer. He was tall enough that he only had to tilt his head slightly to look Tony in the eye. “And no one else can do what I can do,” he said.

“In a universe as big as ours, I somehow doubt that,” Tony said, keeping his tone confident.

“Then what of you, metal man?” asked Maw. “I’m sure you’d call yourself unique?”
“Of course,” Tony laughed. “I’m one of a kind, buddy, as I’m sure you’re about to find out.”

The new additions to Tony’s upgraded Mark L suit detached from his back and lit up with his extra-juiced repulsors. Maw dodged the blast but was blinded, and the distraction was enough for Tony to pull free of his invisible hold.

“Let’s show this joker exactly who he’s dealing with,” Tony said, speaking just as much to himself as he was to JARVIS. But the AI chimed in with his agreement nonetheless, and they flew forward with repulsors blazing.

Maw was forced to pull up a significant part of the park’s garden bed to catch Tony’s onslaught, and Tony was expecting it when the packed earth came flying at his head. He swooped upward to avoid it before diving back down, heading straight for Maw’s skinny, mottled face. Maw was surprised when he looked up, but managed to throw himself aside. Tony grinned behind his faceplate, knowing that he had the upper hand. Maw hadn’t been careful enough when he dodged, he was limping, he was leaning heavily against a tree and Tony was sure that he must have sprained his ankle at least. So much for the almighty power of the children of Thanos– this was easy.

As he spun in the air for a final charge, Tony saw Peter heading back toward them, and he was glad that the kid, at least, had mostly stayed out of the way. But then Maw threw up his hands and Tony was sent flying in the opposite direction, crashing into a tree. Another twist of Maw’s wrist caused the iron railings from the edge of the garden beds to twist through the air and to wrap painfully around Tony, effectively immobilising him.

The Mark L spared his ribs and preserved his ability to breathe, but Tony was stuck, and could do nothing more than yell as Maw’s other hand raised in a high arc, the footpath ripping up with the movement. As Tony watched, the length of concrete and gravel slammed into Peter mid-air, knocking him to the ground, swatting him down like a measly fly.

Tony snarled and snapped and struggled, but the metal writhed like the strongest of serpents as even more railings wrapped around him, constricting his movements and holding him brutally tight.

Maw stepped close, his hand clawed in front of Tony’s face. He ripped away the faceplate with only a small twitch of his fingers, and Tony took the opportunity to bare his teeth before the nanotech did its work and covered his face once again. Maw frowned, surprised, but simply repeated the action again and again, ripping away at the Mark L not only on the face but over any part he could reach, quickening the rate at which the suit's self-repairing capabilities began to fail.

“JARVIS, get me out of here,” Tony snapped.

“— trying, Sir,” JARVIS responded, his voice broken by Maw’s savage attacks on the helmet.

“Can I make a portal, or—“

“Inadvisable— gauntlet trapped— dangerous.“

Tony’s supply of nanobots was impressive but not infinite, and eventually, the faceplate stopped reforming, leaving no barrier between Tony’s face and the cold air.

“I know that you are in possession of an Infinity Stone,” said Maw, sending a sinister smile to Tony before turning to prepare his next instrument of slaughter. “And I know exactly which. You will hand it over.”

“I think you’ll find that I will not,” Tony snapped, still struggling hard.
“Sir, I’m going to jet some coolant,” said JARVIS, his tone desperate as it flowed from the suits external speakers, but Tony knew that it was going to be too little, too late. By the time the coolant could freeze the metal that held Tony hostage, Peter would already be dead.

The kid was lying on the ground, his red and blue suit so bright against the brown of the torn and battered square. He was getting back to his feet but he looked a little dazed, his movements sluggish. The kid must have suffered a hit on the head which had rattled his spidey-sense, since he hadn’t yet noticed the large chunk of marble that was hovering above him.

And Tony… Tony couldn’t move, and from what he had seen of Maw so far he doubted that even offering the Stone would save Peter at this point. But maybe there was something else he could do—something he was good at.

Clint had said the alien looked like the character from Lilo & Stitch, and while Tony could see the resemblance—

“Hey, Squidward,” he yelled. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

Maw turned slowly, maliciously. While there was no way the alien knew what a Squidward was, it was clear that he could tell from the tone that the term had been meant as a belittlement.

“As I said before, human,” Maw spat, “I have no intention of fighting fair.”

As a large chunk of the Washington Square Arch came flying toward Tony’s skull, the last thing he heard was Peter’s scream.

—•—

Tony came to slowly, sluggishly. The very first thing he was aware of was a soft tinkling, like a wind chime blowing in a soft summer breeze. It was a pleasant sound, and Tony didn’t really want to wake up from it, far preferring to let it just lull him back into the deep sleep he had awoken from.

But then, as more awareness returned, he also heard the soft thrumming of an engine, and a quiet muttering of a single voice. He peeked open one eye, unsurprised to see that his faceplate was still missing as his memories filtered in and slotted back into place.

There was something wet dripping down his cheekbone, his left eyelid was sticky, and there was an absolutely horrific pounding against the inside of his skull, but Tony was all right. Maw must have held back with the marble, because even with most of his helmet intact, a blow that hard should have killed him.

He supposed he had the Space Stone to thank for that— the Stone which was still lodged in his reactor. Tony might have had a chance to use it, because even if he couldn’t aim a portal it would at least get him away. Well, he might have, if it weren’t for the glass needles that were pressed against Tony’s body from all directions. Even if it weren’t for Maw’s invisible power holding him still, the shards were effectively pinning him in place. And Tony used the word ‘glass’ very loosely since that was what the shards looked and sounded like, but no glass had ever felt quite so excruciating as it merely touched the surface of Tony’s skin. Only his face remained exposed, but the small area of vulnerable skin was more than enough to send a trickle of fear down his spine.

The purpose of the shards could not be more clear.

Tony cast his still slightly blurred gaze around the area, quickly paring the sound of the engine and the dark, metallic surroundings to conclude that Maw had taken him aboard the spaceship. Maw himself was watching Tony carefully from the side, silent now that he’d noticed Tony was awake,
his eyes narrowed as he considered Tony carefully. Tony might have been able to ask JARVIS to send out a beacon but he didn’t want to give away that he could still be contact, and besides— the helmet, which contained most of the suit’s long-range communication capabilities, was mostly destroyed.

So, situation report— Tony was stuck on a spaceship and probably heading straight toward Thanos, about to tortured for the location of the Space Stone that was currently strapped to his chest, and he had absolutely no way to contact the others.

He was just beginning to think the fateful well, at least it can’t get any worse when he spotted a kid in a brand new red and black suit crawling across the ceiling.

Fucking hell.

If Peter did something stupid, and if Maw saw him—

There would be absolutely nothing Tony could do. He was stuck, unable to move without being torn to shreds by the fucking glass shards. If Maw saw him, Peter was on his own.

Of course, all that begged the question of how the hell Peter was even there when the last Tony had seen, he was about to be crushed by a block of marble—

Well, Tony supposed. Guess it could have been worse, after all.

But better than worst could still be hell fucking bad, and Tony was far enough up shit creek to realise that it was going to take a miracle to get them out of this one.

A miracle. Ha. Tony had never put much stock in the things, always preferring to trust in his own ability and lay faith in his own smarts to pull himself out of any situation. He remembered his mother and her advice of prayer, that there would always be someone listening, that there would always be someone willing to help. When he’d escaped from his very first kidnapping, his mother had been so thankful, so sure that his strength to escape was due to the interference of a higher power.

And maybe it was— who was Tony to say otherwise? But all he had gained from that little experience was the knowledge that God or not, it was down to him. Maybe he had help, maybe he didn’t, but either way— he needed to throw in his all to save himself.

But now… Now, he supposed, he had something concrete to pray for. Someone concrete to pray to.

“Heimdall,” he whispered under his breath, the word holding not so much the reverence afforded to a deity, but more that which was given to a last, desperate hope. Somehow, knowing that Heimdall was up in Asgard and that he was no more than a person made it feel a little less like prayer and a little more like calling a teammate for help— though surely that wouldn’t have tasted so bitter. But for Peter, Tony found himself willing to do whatever it took. “I know that you have no real cause to like me overly much, but please, I’m begging here. Heimdall, Loki said you see everything— please, I’d even take anEinherji right now—”

“Cease your prattling,” Maw ordered, moving back over and thrusting his empty yet deadly hand in Tony’s direction. “You will answer to me, not to whatever false god your people place their hopes in.”

“You know, I hold little respect for anyone who calls anyone else’s god false,” Tony spat. “Historically, that’s never really ended well.”

“I need no god,” Maw replied. “I have my power, and that is enough to place me far above anything
that you could conjure.”

“I think you’ll find you’re wrong there,” Tony muttered, hoping the words were true. But he knew that Heimdall, for all his powers, could not truly hear a prayer in the way that the mortals believed gods could. Heimdall could hear spoken words, but no matter how hard Tony prayed, no matter how loudly he screamed that he wished for Loki to return he knew that so long as those screams remained inside his own mind, Heimdall would not hear him.

He just had to hope that his initial plea was enough to get at least the attention of the Watcher, and that when Heimdall turned his gaze, the situation would be enough to warrant help.

Tony wasn’t alone, not by a long stretch. But that was the problem—Peter was crawling over the ceiling now in full view, not even trying to hide as he waved one arm in Tony’s direction.

Maw still hadn’t noticed, leaning in as his stinking breath ghosted over Tony’s cheeks, the glass shards tinkling together almost jovially as they scratched over the surface of his skin, not quite cutting but leaving a trail of fire and agony in their wake nonetheless. The thought of how they would feel if they actually pressed into him was horrifying, and Tony shied away from it, focusing instead on the creature before him.

“You will tell me where the Space Stone is,” Maw spat. “We tracked a Stone to both you, and the other human. The location of the Time Stone has been known for centuries and you have been in contact with Asgardians. I know that you are in possession of the Space Stone. Where is it?”

Tony could have answered with something smart, something cocky. But his brain was rattled and his head hurt, and it was just as satisfying to grin and bare his bloody teeth in defiance.

Maw remained mostly impassive, his expression unchanged. There was no hint of rage, no clue as to his thoughts— but then he lifted his hand, and the corner of his mouth turned up into a smile. Tony flinched as only one of the glass shards began to shift, aiming for a spot right in the centre of Tony’s brow. He almost went cross-eyed trying to keep it in sight, though he knew it would make no difference— it was so fine and sharp that it was difficult to see even from a safe distance.

As the point pressed against his forehead Tony knew that he would stay silent, knew that he had to, because if he so much as uttered a whimper, Peter would do something stupid. He had to be quiet.

Then the shard pierced his skin, and it was pain like Tony had never before known.

I’ve been through worse, Tony tried to convince himself, swallowing the scream that threatened to tear through his throat. I’ve been through worse.

It didn’t make him feel any better.

Chapter End Notes

I swear I’m not doing this on purpose
Chapter Summary

“Well…” Peter rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Have you ever seen that really old movie called ‘Aliens’?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ebony Maw was an ugly bastard, Tony decided. It wasn’t because of his wrinkly, grey skin, or the thin wisps of white hair that wouldn’t look out of place on a corpse, or the lipless mouth, or even the lack of nose (Voldemort, much?). All of those things, after all, could possibly be considered the paramount of beauty within the confines of Maw’s own culture, for who knew what aliens considered attractive? No– it wasn’t about the construction of his features, but it was something about Maw’s eyes. They were pale and intelligent, and shining with a sharp cruelty that would have transformed even the prettiest of faces into something grotesque. His expression was equally as contorted, curling his face into a twisted parody of a smile. It was only the smallest of twitches at the corner of his mouth, but it betrayed his coarse enjoyment of the agony he was causing– that he was inflicting upon a person who had done him no wrong.

Well, okay, so Tony had lashed out with a few truly creative insults that would have put even Shakespeare to shame, but nothing that warranted the clinical intensity with which Maw treated him.

The first shard had remained in Tony’s skin for only a few seconds, but the pain had been intense. Tony was proud to admit that he had remained conscious for the ordeal - though no doubt things would have been easier if he hadn’t - and that he had held out. He hadn’t uttered a sound, and he hoped that Peter, wherever he had crawled to, was not going to act. If things remained the same, Tony would be able to withstand it. The few precise cuts with the glass needles that had followed were equally as painful, but Tony held in every whimper.

However, things did not remain so easy. Maw, Tony had quickly come to realise, was more than simply cruel. He was maliciously clever with his work in a way that Tony’s past torturers had never been, being careful with the way that he applied his shards so as to cause more than mere physical torment.

During the time that Tony had been on the ship, as long as that may be, Maw’s hold on Tony had loosened slightly, but not from any neglect or arrogance. You see, while Tony’s face was all that remained uncovered by his armour, the rest of the suit was damaged, and the nanotech had yet to recharge enough to repair what had been lost. Maw took advantage of that fact and placed his shards at the suit’s weakest points, pushing them in far enough that they just brushed against Tony’s skin. It was painful, but not torturous– just so long as he remained still. They came through the suit at all angles, and if Tony moved either way he would put pressure on them and they would pierce his skin with an agony that became impossibly worse every time. And as Maw’s telekinetic hold became less, Tony had to keep himself still with his own aching muscles and carefully controlled repulsors rather than relying on the concrete grasp of Maw’s power. In a way he was his own prisoner, and that upset him far more than the pain alone.

“All you need to do is reveal the location of the Space Stone, and this will all stop,” Maw crooned,
twirling his fingers to bring a shard back down towards Tony’s vulnerable face, his pale pupils widening slightly in what Tony easily recognised as pleasure. The alien was clearly lying— he was enjoying himself far too much. If Tony gave away the Stone, he wouldn’t be released. It was Afghanistan all over again, where he knew that if he gave in, they would simply keep asking and asking. Give an inch and be forced to give a mile, and all that jazz. Although, Maw already claimed to know the location of the Time Stone, so he wouldn’t need to torture Tony for that— but he seemed the type that would keep going just for fun, anyway. Besides, his partner was dead. Perhaps he would be unwilling to go back up against the Avengers once more, in which case he would be likely to use Tony as a bargaining chip at best, and bait at worst.

“I’m not going to tell you,” Tony snapped, his voice shaking a little but cutting nonetheless. “No matter what you do, I’m not going to break.”

Maw raised his hand. “I do not believe you.”

Tony couldn’t contain the spasm in his facial muscles as the shard came closer, and then the wince as the flinch caused a needle at his left hip to press hard into his skin. He tried to right himself through the pain, not able to cope with the thought of having two of the fucking things cutting into him at the same time, but no sooner had he managed that three more of them began to shift, heading for his cheeks, his chin, his neck.

*Heimdall, buddy,* Tony thought desperately, *I could really use those Einherjar right about now.*

Tony tried to crane his head away from the incoming shards. Maw, noticing, released his hold a little further, and Tony’s whole body shook as it pressed against the needles all over the suit.

*Almost there.*

The glint in Maw’s eyes was absolutely gleeful as he watched, almost standing on his toes as he leaned forward once again, waiting for the scream that Tony prayed would never pass his lips.

Then there was a yell and a flash of blue, and Maw was knocked down by a star-spangled shield that came flying in from the left.

Tony let out a disbelieving laugh. Never mind Heimdall— who needs gods when Captain America is on the case?

He watched with rapt attention as the shield was followed by its owner. Steve leapt down from a higher deck and delivered a high powered kick to Maw’s stomach, sending him flying against a wall.

“Tony!” Steve exclaimed, rushing over. Tony almost shook his head but managed to catch himself, stopping Steve audibly instead.

“Stay there,” he said. “Maw’s not out, yet.”

Tony was sure of it, because the shards were still in place, and the tentative hold Maw had on his suit was still aiding him from falling upon the shards embedded in his armour. From what he’d seen, Maw’s power required constant application— if it was still in place, then Maw was not yet unconscious.

No sooner than when Steve stopped in his tracks was Tony’s theory proven right, as a piece of steel that was probably part of the floor slammed into Steve and pinned him against the wall, the edges digging in and anchoring the metal in place.

Steve snapped and yelled but he was held firm, and Tony watched with building rage as Maw stood
and brushed himself down. He had taken a full kick to the gut from a super soldier yet he appeared unharmed, his smile in place as he walked toward Tony once more.

“So, one of your teammates has come to your aid,” Maw said, and if Tony had to guess, he’d say the guy was pleased. “If he cares enough to try and save you… perhaps you care enough to try and save him?”

“Definitely not,” Tony replied immediately. “Steve? Heh. Hate the guy. He keeps trying to make me eat salad and thinks that the best way to stop Thor from blowing up the toaster is with positive reinforcement.”

The alien seemed confused.

“Trust me,” Tony stressed. “Taking him out would be doing me a favour.”

“That’s a shame,” Maw sighed. “But perhaps the pain will loosen his tongue.”

If one of the shards had moved away from Tony a few minutes before, he would have been relieved. But as it were, seeing the instrument of torture head toward Steve was terrifying. Still, Tony expected Steve to remain strong and stoic, to stare Maw down and refuse to back away. Steve was certainly one of the strongest people Tony had the pleasure of knowing, and he would not break, not now. Not when the universe was on the line, and not before Tony would be able to get them out.

But, to Tony’s complete shock and horror, Steve immediately began to panic, rearing back his head with his eyes blown wide.

“Just tell him, Tony,” Steve yelped, struggling against the hard steel that pinned him down, leaning as far as he could away from Maw and the approaching glass shard. “It’s not like you still need the reactor in your chest to keep you alive!”

“Goddamn it, Steve,” Tony snapped, caught by surprise into the exclamation. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you guys that!”

“The Space Stone is in your chest?” Maw asked, spinning immediately and reaching toward Tony, his creepy little hands grasping out horrifyingly close to Tony’s reactor.

“Yes,” Tony said, baring his teeth. “It is. And now that you know, I’m going to have to kill you.”

Maw laughed loud and hard, throwing back his head and leaning away from Tony ever so slightly. With Maw distracted and the telekinetic hold on Tony’s suit lighter than it had ever been, it was just the opportunity he had been waiting for.

Gritting his teeth Tony arched his spine, throwing back his head and bringing up his chest. He couldn’t help the scream as the shards dug deep, but he channelled the pain and anger and sweet, sweet adrenaline to push his body to its limits, using the repulsors to compensate for his aching muscles to get his chest level with Maw’s.

It was funny, really, how easy it was to kill the guy. It only took one unibeam and Maw was falling to the ground, a great big and fucking satisfying hole in his chest.

Tony also fell to the ground with a crash, and for a moment the only sound was his gasping breaths, heavy with both exertion and pain. Maw lay in a smouldering heap, and Tony sneered at the body, enjoying the sight of him for the first time.

The silence was interrupted as a teenager encased in red and black dropped down from the ceiling.
“Holy shit,” Peter breathed, his mask folding away to reveal his pale face. “I am so glad you like me.”

“Who said I like you?” Tony groaned. “Now, are you just going to leave me here?”

Peter scrambled to begin pulling the glass shards from Tony’s body. As predicted, the power holding them in place had dissipated when Maw had died and most had fallen to the ground, but those that were lodged in his armour and in his skin remained so, and they hurt just as much. Carefully, Peter took hold of one of the shards, and Tony was glad the Iron Spider suit protected him from the sharp edges—though how he had managed to get his hands on it was something that Tony definitely needed an explanation for, along with a thousand other things.

But, first things first.

The shard hurt just as much coming out as it had going in, and Tony was once again panting heavily as he braced himself against the floor.

“Wait!” Steve shouted. Tony glanced over just in time to see Steve push hard against the bar across his chest, detaching it from the wall and freeing himself with relative ease. Tony was about to complain along the lines of why the hell didn’t you do that earlier when the Captain came charging over and knocked Peter’s hands away from the shard he had yet to entirely remove, and Tony swore as the movement jostled his wounds.

“What the hell, Cap?” Tony snapped.

“You shouldn’t remove an object from a stab wound,” Steve said, frowning hard. “It can make the bleeding worse. I’ve seen far too many soldiers die that way.”

“If I’m going to die, it’ll be from shock due to the pain of these fucking things,” Tony snarled. “Get them out.”

Peter glanced between them, his expression scared and his skin almost grey. Tony was almost more worried for the kid at that point than he was for himself—he could deal with a little pain, but Peter was seeing the results of torture for the first time. Despite his experience as a New York vigilante and his own short stint as a kidnapping victim, Peter had never quite had a taste of just how cruel the world could be, and Tony was all too aware of just what that could do to a person.

“Hey,” said Tony, trying to raise a hand to comfort the kid despite the agony that shot up his arm at the movement. “Hey, kid, it’s okay. Steve’s going to deal with this, don’t worry. I’m going to be fine.”

“Don’t,” Peter snapped, though he took Tony’s hand anyway. “Please don’t. I know you’re going to be all right, but you just— I just—“

Steve knelt beside Peter and put a hand on his shoulder, right on the spot Tony had originally been aiming for.

“Breathe,” Steve ordered. His own breaths were deep and steady, and Peter quite clearly focused on them to calm himself. The first few were a bit wheezy but soon they relaxed, and Tony found himself following along. “There you go,” Steve sighed with relief.

“We need to get him to a hospital,” Peter said weakly.

“I don’t think that’s an option,” Steve replied softly. “But Tony’s right. I’ll think of a way to fix this. I just need you to go and—“
“No,” Peter argued. “Please, let me stay.”

“No, it’s fine,” Tony groaned.

There was only one way he was going to get out of this and he winced at the thought of it, but… Steve wasn’t going to let up, and Peter was worried, and if Tony didn’t get the shards out of his body right fucking now he was going to go mad.

“Look,” he said, doing his best to raise his hands as if in surrender. “Do you remember when Thor mentioned those golden apples?”

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“You’re saying that you’ve been immortal for months,” Steve said, his voice steadily rising toward a growl, “and you didn’t tell us?”

So awesome, Peter mouthed, the news of Tony’s upgraded cellular regeneration perking him right up, and Tony gave him a covert wink when he hoped Steve wasn’t looking.

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After a solid few minutes of lecturing, Tony winced loudly and with an unnecessary level of drama. Steve’s narrowed eyes made it quite clear that he was all too aware of Tony’s ruse, but he also knew that the pain was real, and the wince served at least as a clear reminder of their priorities.

“We will be talking about this later,” Steve said firmly, giving in to Tony’s silent request.

If it were anyone else, Tony might have worried about letting someone so clearly upset with him handle objects embedded in his skin, but Steve was far too noble for such maliciousness. When he took hold of the shard closest to him and pulled it out, he was as gentle as he possibly could be.

Still, he knew that Steve would hold to his promise– he would have to go into more detail about the apple at some point in the near future. That was not going to be fun.

Luckily, the shards were thin and most of their value appeared to be in their ability to cause pain more than inflicting actual damage, and Tony began to heal quickly. Of course, as per his earlier tests on the subject, the injuries didn’t simply vanish, but the rate at which the first clotted was enough to calm Steve’s worries and entice the super soldier into removing the rest. Peter was not permitted to assist but he couldn’t be prevented from watching. Now that he knew Tony was going to be all right, though, he seemed entirely more capable of coping.

“So what was your plan?” Tony asked curiously, trying to take his mind off the pain as well as just honestly wanting to know. “You did have a plan, right? Because I’ll be honest, Cap, that squeal was something I’d expect from one of my fans, not—“

“Yes, that was part of the plan,” Steve said as he removed another shard from Tony’s thigh. “It was Peter’s plan.”

Tony glanced to the kid questioningly.

“Steve was the distraction,” agreed Peter, nodding. “I totally had a plan.”

“Oh yeah?” asked Tony, raising a disbelieving eyebrow. “And that was?”
“Well…” Peter rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Have you ever seen that really old movie called ‘Aliens’?”

Tony didn’t even try to hold back the groan. “We really need to talk about your classification of ‘really old’, kid,” he said.

“Welcome to my world,” sighed Steve. Peter, the little shit, just grinned.

When all the shards were removed, Tony found that he could stand, albeit with effort. His muscles were all screaming at him and he needed Peter’s shoulder for support, but he did manage to struggle to his feet, and once he was up things became a little easier. He was also able to remove his armour, the nanotech thankfully still working enough to slip back into the reactor.

Steve looked on with interest as Tony stretched, though his gaze lingered on the puncture marks and bright patches of blood littered across Tony’s clothes. They were small, though, just as Tony had suspected, and not threatening. Just painful now, like paper cuts, and itching as they healed. He took the opportunity to cast his gaze around the spaceship, and noticed that Maw remained exactly where he had fallen, his eyes still wide with shock.

“Well,” Tony sighed, glaring down at the literally smoking corpse. “At least that’s both of the posers who tried to invade our world dead.”

“Uh, actually,” said Peter, and Steve huffed in exasperation.

“Actually what?” Tony asked curiously, glancing back over to them.

“There were four aliens, not just the two,” said Steve, and oh yeah, Tony remembered hearing that over the comms.

“Well, I got him dead,” Steve replied immediately. “We were caught by surprise. We were focused on this one—“ Steve gestured to the corpse, “—and the other two seemed to come out of nowhere.”

“Then Maw came to us,” Tony said.

“Yes,” Steve agreed. “He had some kind of vehicle, similar to the ones the Chitauri had, but not exactly. He disappeared while the other two fought us. One of them managed to injure Clint. Nothing serious, but enough to be a worry at the time.”

“And then Natasha tore him apart,” said Peter. “So. Three are dead.”

“We captured the other,” said Steve. “She says her name is Proxima Midnight. Before Peter alerted me about you, Nat was talking about sending her to the Raft.”

“The Raft,” Tony muttered, pulling a face. If this Proxima Midnight worked for Thanos, then Tony had little doubt that she was… not a very nice person. But the Raft was an awful place that he had tried to have taken off the table, but that the UN was unwilling to remove entirely.

Perhaps, though, it would come in handy. The Raft would never have held the brute that Strange and Hulk sent into space, but anything less than Hulk…

Proxima Midnight may have valuable information. As much as Tony hated the thought of how far some people might be willing to go on the quest to obtain it, information was something that they
sorely needed. Even the Asgardians had little knowledge about the Mad Titan, what with it being centuries since they had last encountered him.

“So, three dead, one in custody,” Tony summarised. “Not bad for our second alien invasion. We totally won.”

“And lost you along the way,” Steve corrected.

“Yeah, about that,” said Tony, turning to Peter. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I wasn’t about to let you get kidnapped,” Peter huffed, crossing his arms. “You’d have done the same for me.”

“I’m an adult. You don’t get to throw yourself into space!” Tony exclaimed. “What would your aunt say?”

Peter immediately paled. “Please don’t tell her,” he pleaded.

“If you’d died, I wouldn’t have had a choice,” Tony replied.

“Actually, I think that would have fallen on Miss Potts, since I was totally the one who rescued you,” Peter corrected. “You would have been gone without me, Mr Stark.”

“That’s true,” said Steve. “Peter was the one who alerted us to your capture. He was already hanging off the side of the spaceship when I managed to catch up on one of the hover-bikes, and thank goodness you let Nat convince you to put blasters on those things, because otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to get in, and we don’t all have new Iron suits for AIs to summon for oxygen—“

“This new suit is totally awesome, Mr Stark!” Peter piped up.

“If I had known you’d use it for space travel, I never would have built it,” Tony groaned.

“It saved his life,” Steve said sombrely. “And yours.”

“I had everything under control, I was going to get out of it myself,” Tony huffed. “But I guess it doesn’t matter, since Maw is now dead and we’re all stuck together on an alien craft in the middle of space.” Tony sighed, and glanced over to Peter. He was looking a bit down on himself, but… honestly, the kid had done well. He had been braver than Tony could ever have expected, he was just as stuck in space as the rest of them, and he was still just a kid. “Hey Pete?” he asked. “How’d you like to be made an official Avenger?”

Peter’s eyes were immediately wide with joyous awe.

“Seriously?” he asked.

“I offered this to you before, kid, you turned me down—“

“Tony,” Steve admonished softly, shaking his head. But it seemed that he agreed with Tony’s plan, for he kept speaking. “Peter, you’ve been an Avenger for a long while, whether it was official or not. We know that you didn’t want all the press that comes with it, and that you wanted to help the little guy— and we’re not going to force you into any of that. But that does not change the fact that you’re one of us.”

“So kid, you’re an Avenger now,” said Tony, stepping forward and ‘knighting’ him with his arm by performing a chopping motion over both shoulders. “Congrats.”
Peter’s grin was wide and bright, and Tony felt the need to give himself a high five for successfully cheering the kid up.

“Don’t let this distract you, though,” Steve advised. “We’re still in a dire situation.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Peter. He glanced wide-eyed around the spaceship that was currently hurtling them thousands of miles away from their own planet with no immediately clear way of turning back. Then he looked to Tony with eyes full of expectant trust. “So… now what?”

The discussion for what to do next was long and difficult. In the meantime, they managed to locate what could only be an escape pod to jettison Maw’s body (which none of them wanted to look at for any longer than they had to) and to find the bridge, which told them absolutely nothing in regard to where they were or how to get back.

“I think we should stay here,” Tony continued to argue after pointing out that none of the controls were even close to being recognisable. “I mean, this ship is clearly on a set course to wherever Thanos’ base is, right? And we have an Infinity Stone.”

“We should head back,” Steve disagreed. “We shouldn’t try and face this by ourselves, Tony, that’s reckless.”

“How? Do you know how to steer this thing?” Tony demanded, and Steve shook his head.

“You have the Space Stone,” said Steve. “You can get us home in a heartbeat.”

“Steve, I can’t even use that thing to accurately cross a room, and you want me to try and cross the galaxy?” Tony asked in disbelief. He glanced to Peter who was watching on quietly, before looking back to Steve. “No. I won’t risk it.”

“Yet you would risk fighting Thanos?” Steve laughed bitterly. “Listen to yourself– everyone else is back on Earth. Divided we fall, Tony.”

“We’ve been pretty divided before,” Tony replied. “We’ve lived so far.”

Tony’s words, of course, tempted fate, for in that moment there was the unmistakable crash of a collision and the whole ship was wracked with shudders.

“That certainly doesn't sound good,” said Steve.

“There’s someone coming!” Peter exclaimed. “We’re being boarded!”

“You watch way too much sci-fi,” Tony complained, but of course that was when a metal sphere bounced into the middle of the group.

“Grenade!” Steve yelled, and managed to cover it with his shield before it went off. Tony immediately brought his amour back out– it was still damaged, still without a helmet, but the repulsors were still working beautifully.

A humanoid figure flew around a corner and Tony immediately fired off his first two blasts before jumping into the air to follow him. The man - for Tony was quite sure it was a man - was wearing some kind of metal mask and jet boots. He carried a gun that shot out electrifying blasts, as well as a fucking annoying magnetic weapon that hit Tony’s chest and stuck him to a wall.
Tony pulled himself free just in time to see Peter get caught by some kind of rope weapon that tangled around his arms, and he fell to the ground with a shout.

“Peter!” Tony yelled, diving to help—

Then Tony was knocked out of the air by a tree branch, his head hitting the ground painfully. Maniacal laughter gave away the next attack as a racoon appeared from the shadows and began firing off a gun in all directions. Tony watched as Steve approached it with his shield and managed to hit it hard, just before the tree also knocked him down, sending him flying in the same direction as Peter.

“Oh!” The racoon yelled, and that was enough to cause Tony to pause, landing on the ground beside Steve, who was working on freeing Peter. The tree helped the racoon back up while the masked man landed beside them. They were quickly joined by another two aliens so that the two groups stood opposite each other, all breathing heavily, squaring each other off.

There were five hostiles in all– the man in the mask, a big grey-blue guy, a girl with antenna, a racoon, and the tree. Rather a diverse group, but then, Tony supposed his experiences with aliens thus far were rather limited. The masked man with the long, russet leather coat was standing in front of the other group, and he took a step forward as he addressed the three Avengers.

“My name is Star-Lord,” the man said menacingly, “And I am here to take back what is mine.”

Tony blinked. “Star… Lord?”

“That’s right. Star-Lord. You got a problem with that?”

“Well then, my Lord Vader,” said Tony, getting a snicker from Peter. “I’m afraid to tell you that—”

“His name is not Vader,” interrupted the big guy. “He is Quill.”

“No, you idiot,” the man called Quill complained, pressing a button on the side of his mask to reveal his rather human looking face. “That’s a reference to a– hang on. You guys know what Star Wars is?”

“No way,” said Tony, matching Quill’s curious expression. “You’re from Earth?”

“Of course they are,” said Steve, glancing between them all with wide eyes. “They’re speaking English.”

“Ew,” said the racoon, his lip curling in disgust. “What’s an English?”

“I’m not from Earth,” Quill scoffed, ignoring the racoon entirely. “I’m from Missouri. Idiot.”

Peter started to laugh. “That’s on Earth, dude,” he giggled.

Quill frowned with the universal expression for I don’t quite believe you but whatever, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“Guess it’s a novelty to meet people who actually know what I’m talking about when I refer to heroes like Kevin Bacon,” he said, which set Peter off once again.

Tony, meanwhile, whistled low before jabbing a thumb at the super soldier behind him. “And I thought I had it bad dealing with the nonagenarian over here.”

“Tony,” Steve groaned in exasperation.
Well, Steve could go about negotiations however he wanted, but Tony liked to break the ice, form some level of camaraderie.

Not, Tony was quick to realise, that it had worked this time around.

It soon became apparent that Quill had merely been stalling, buying time for the big guy to creep around the side of the group without the Avengers noticing. They had no warning before Peter’s giggle suddenly morphed into a yell, and the big guy was already backing away with Peter in a headlock before either Tony or Steve could do a single thing.

“You know, I’m surprised that Thanos has started recruiting Terrans,” said Quill, standing beside the big guy and staring smugly at his captive. “But I suppose it’s only natural. It is a planet of outlaws, after all— but then, even us Guardians are way too noble to join that guy.”

“I am Groot,” said the tree, nodding in agreement. And, well, okay. Talking racoons, talking trees. Not the weirdest thing Tony had ever seen. He could deal with it.

“What?” Peter yelped. “We’re not with Thanos! We’re Avengers!”

The fact that Quill didn’t recognise the A word seemed more shocking to Peter than anything else they had encountered during that horror of a day, but Tony was more focused on the big fucking gun the racoon was handing to Quill to press against Peter’s skull.

“Don’t you dare hurt him,” Tony threatened, raising his repulsor.

“Or what?” asked the racoon. “If you shoot, you’ll kill the kid. If you don’t shoot, we kill the kid.”

“No,” said Quill, shooting a glare at the racoon, who shrugged innocently. “If you shoot, you’ll kill the kid. That’s right. But if you tell us where Gamora is, we’ll hand him over in one piece.”

“Probably,” the racoon added with a sadistic grin.

“I won’t tell you anything until you give me back my kid,” Tony snarled.

“Only if you give me back Gamora,” Quill snapped.

“I don’t even know who the hell that is,” Tony shouted back.

“Oh, please,” growled Quill. “Thanos’ favourite daughter. The rebel. You’re his people, you know exactly—“

“For the last time, man, we’re the Avengers,” Peter stressed, not quite getting the fact that they hadn’t quite gone intergalactic yet. Well, Asgard knew who they were, but other than that—

“For the last time, kid, I don’t care,” Quill grouched back. “Now, Transformer, Mr Flag Man—“

“Why don’t we introduce ourselves,” said Steve, holding up his hands and speaking slowly, carefully. His shield rested by his feet, close enough to reach if need be. “This here is Tony, also known as Iron Man. I’m Steve Rogers, Captain America—“

“Well, now I know you’re lying,” Quill snorted. “Captain America’s dead, everyone knows that.”

“I don’t,” said the big guy.

“Everyone Terran,” Quill said exasperatedly.
“That is far too long a story to explain,” Tony groaned.

“And the rest of us do not care enough to hear it,” said the racoon. “I’m Rocket, by the way. And this lump of kindling is Groot.”

“I am Groot,” agreed Groot.

“Hi, I’m Mantis,” said the girl with the antenna, waving daintily with her hand.

“I am Drax, the Destroyer!” the big guy announced. Peter winced at the loudness of it by his ear– or maybe at the fact that the guy with an arm wrapped around the kid’s throat had just called himself the destroyer. Maybe it was both.

“And I’m Peter, also known as Spider-Man,” said Peter, the small croak in his voice making Tony grit his teeth.

“Quill, he stole your name!” Drax exclaimed, and Tony lurched forward, worried his grip on the kid would strengthen.

“Why would he want to do that? Peter’s a stupid name,” said Rocket. “And don’t you move an inch, you beautiful machine,” he added, swinging a gun that he had pulled from… somewhere and aiming it at Tony’s head.

“Hey, it is not,” Quill snapped. “It’s totally normal amongst Terrans! It’s a good name!”

“It’s weird,” Rocket replied, glancing to Quill even as he kept his gun trained on Tony. “I’ve never met another person called Peter.”

“You just… did, though,” said Peter, lifting his hand from Drax’s arm to give a wave. “Hi.”

“I’ve never met another racoon who was so annoying,” said Quill. “Yet you don’t see me talking about it all the time.”

“Don’t call me that,” Rocket said, his fur bristling in anger.

“What?” asked Quill. “Annoying?”

“No. Racoon. It’s demeaning.”

“It’s what you are!”

“Oookay,” said Tony. “Not that this isn’t fun, but could we please just calm down and talk about the real issue here? We don’t have your Gamora, and we don’t—”

“Well we don’t need to hear it,” Quill interrupted. “I don’t care what you call yourselves– Captain America, Revengers—“

“Avengers,” Peter corrected loudly.

“Hey,” Drax complained, glaring down at the kid in his arms. “You said before that it would be the last time! You are a liar!”

“Oh my god,” Quill groaned.

“Wait!” exclaimed Mantis, stepping forward for the first time, glancing between Tony and Steve with unconcealed interest. “You’re the ones… that Thor told us about.”
Tony froze.

“You know Thor?” Steve asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” said Quill, shrugging. “Tall guy, blonde, not all that good looking. Now, about Gamora—“

“Where was he?”

“No,” said Quill, pressing his gun back up tight to Peter’s skull, leaning forward to glare at Steve. “She. Gamora is a she.”

Steve shook his head. “I meant Thor,” he said, and honestly Tony thought that was a bit risky. As much as he wanted to know about what Thor had been up to (and by ‘Thor’ he did, of course, mean Loki), he was also aware that this Gamora seemed to be a bit of a touchy subject for Quill.

“We met him on Knowhere,” said Rocket. “There were two Asgardians, and you know, they’re supposed to be gods? But they didn’t do a whole lot. Showed up late.”

“Gamora was already gone,” Mantis said sadly.

“She wasn’t gone, she’s been taken,” Quill snapped.

“Were they okay?” Tony asked.

“I am Groot,” Groot said earnestly.

“Oh, that’s helpful, thank you,” snapped Tony, and then immediately felt bad for doing so when the tree frowned with hurt.

“We only ask, because Thor and his brother are our friends,” said Steve calmly. “Please. Were they okay?”

“Brother?” Rocket said, confused. “I know Groot can sometimes get confused with genders, but the rest of us are pretty good with that.”

“The other Asgardian was definitely a woman,” Drax confirmed.

“And thank god for that,” Quill muttered.

A woman? Well, that didn’t mean anything worrying. After all, Loki could easily change his shape, there was the possibility that—

“I’m sure he’s fine,” said Steve quietly, placing a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“Of course he is,” Tony replied stiffly, shrugging Steve’s touch away. “It’s us I’m worried about.”

Specifically Peter, who was still held in Drax’s grasp, trying to lean away from Mantis who appeared to be stroking his cheek.

“Right,” snapped Quill, clearly also coming to the end of his patience. With his free hand, he pulled a smaller gun from his belt to aim at Steve, keeping the other trained on Peter. Rocket bared his teeth and the tree stepped closer, raising his own wooden hands and… well, Tony had never heard a tree growl before but he was quite sure that was what was happening. “I have had enough,” Quill continued. “It doesn’t matter whether Thor knows you or not, I know that you know something. And if you don’t speak now, the kid gets french fried.”
Not wasting another single moment, Tony leapt into the air and charged forward, colliding with Quill and knocking him to the ground. In the same moment, Rocket’s blast made a reverberating boom as it hit Steve’s shield, and Drax yelled as teenaged teeth dug into his arm.

“Stop!” Mantis shouted, but no one was willing to listen.

A wooden vine wrapped around Tony’s chest and yanked him backward, giving Quill the chance to get his hands around Tony’s neck. Groot let go when a pile of webbing covered his eyes, but Quill held firm.

“Mr Stark!” Peter yelled, and from the corner of his eye Tony could see Steve grab the kid around the waist. Good. The two groups were separated again, with the Avengers on one side and the motley group of aliens on the other, Tony and Quill together in the middle, their hands literally at each other’s throats.

“Last chance, Quill,” Tony snarled, warming up the repulsors on his hands. “If you go now, we’ll let you.”

Quill merely spat in Tony’s face, and Tony didn’t want to kill the guy– in all honesty, he seemed all right, just a person who’d been screwed over by Thanos just as much as anyone else.

“So be it,” Tony said.

He was about to fire when Drax took hold of his wrists, pulled them from Quill’s neck, and pressed them against each other, palms together.

“Damn,” Tony growled. If he fired now, all he’d accomplish would be to blow off his own hands. And with his muscles as sore as they were and the angle at which Drax held his arms, Tony didn’t have the strength to pull away. A smug smile lifted the corner of Quill’s mouth, but before another word could fall from his lips—

There was a bright flash of green between the two factions, and Drax and Quill both released Tony as they raised their hands to cover their eyes. With hands outstretched to catch his fall Tony could only squeeze his eyelids tightly closed against the brightness of the onslaught. By the time he was back on his feet the light was fading somewhat, and a figure became visible amongst the green, tall and lithe and wielding a brand new sceptre tipped with a bright yellow stone.

“You shall not harm them!” he snarled, slamming the sceptre on the ground like he was attempting to imitate Gandalf– though no one could ever mistake this god for an old, decrepit wizard, and Tony pulled himself back to standing in captivated shock. Another blast of magic exploded from the wickedly sharp weapon, this time knocking down only the aliens, and not affecting the three Avengers in the slightest.

“Oh, shit,” said Quill, staring up with wide eyes.

Then—

“Hey, Loki,” said Peter, raising his hand and wiggling his fingers in a small wave.

“You know this guy?” asked Quill incredulously, though his gaze didn’t leave the glowing god in front of him. “You do realise who he is, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter drawled. “He’s our friend.”

“And you’ve just confirmed the fact that you’re with Thanos,” Quill argued. “You do realise that this
“You have an empath, do you not?” Loki interrupted, the yellow glow of his sceptre flashing brighter for a moment. “Use her to discover the truth, instead of simply snapping out accusations like a child.”

The aliens all turned to Mantis, who was standing with her hands on her hips and an unimpressed expression on her face.

“I was trying to tell you,” she said to them all. “I felt the young one with floppy hair. He was afraid of us, but he does not want to hurt us.”

“I wasn’t afraid,” Peter muttered.

Finally unable to deny that the Avengers did not work for Thanos, Quill deflated, and Steve approached him cautiously, clearly planning on negotiation now that they had all somewhat calmed.

Now that the danger had passed, however, Tony couldn’t find it in himself to really care. Ignoring them entirely, his feet began moving forward with barely a thought. His damaged armour was already shifting and swirling over his skin, revealing the shirt and sweatpants he had been wearing when Strange had pulled him out of his penthouse what felt like a year ago, though he knew it could only have been a couple of hours at most. When he was close enough, he lifted his hands and cupped them around sharp cheekbones, staring drunkenly into bright green eyes that shone with concern.

“Loki,” Tony whispered, his voice cracking and sounding absolutely pathetic. He swallowed hard, and offered what he hoped was a cocky grin. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“I was in the neighbourhood,” Loki said, and Tony felt his chest swell at the sound of that jokingly dry tone he had ached to hear. “I heard that a rich Midgardian had been kidnapped, and thought it might be you.”

Tony laughed— a short, breathless thing that had Loki grinning in return, wide and bright and as if they hadn’t been apart for more than just a moment. It was the sort of smile that let the rest of the world just fall away— the sort of smile that Tony loved to kiss. Never one to deny himself, Tony stood on his tiptoes and threaded his fingers through Loki’s dark hair. He felt the hard press of the sceptre against his back as Loki returned the embrace, but he didn’t mind, just relishing in the ecstasy of feeling Loki’s cool breath against his skin.

When their lips finally brushed together, it wasn’t a proper kiss at all. It was just the smallest amount of pressure and the tiniest of touches, just an affirmation of the contact they had both so dearly craved.

“Hello, Anthony,” Loki whispered against Tony’s lips, his eyes closed and his breathing slow. “I did miss you.”

The fact that they were still in the middle of space, or that Quill still seemed rather hostile, or that Tony’s muscles were still sore seemed entirely of little consequence. All that mattered was they were back in the warmth of each others’ embrace, the simple comfort of their bodies pressed together soothing all the aches of their separation. It was calming in a way that nothing else could ever be, and standing in Loki’s arms for the first time in far too long, Tony finally felt like everything was going to turn out all right.
Chapter End Notes

Loki's pov of chapters 3-8 has been posted as part 5 of this series.
“Earth has the Time Stone,” Tony said, and Quill froze in his tracks. Sensing blood in the water, Tony added—“Come on, Quill, you know what that means.”

Quill turned back to face Tony, his expression void of his usual humour. When he answered, his voice was harsh, firm, and determined, the words spat out like something halfway between a battle cry and a prayer.

“It means,” he said, “that Earth has bait.”

Later, Tony would take the time to rebuke all of Peter’s ridiculous claims about how he and Loki acted after a (according to Peter, anyway) ‘not actually all that long’ separation. Because as much as he knows that he sure did hold onto Loki for longer than strictly necessary, he was quite sure that they did not profess their love to each other a thousand times, there was certainly no fairy-tale vows of never leaving each other again, and for god’s sake, there was no way that Tony’s voice was that high pitched.

Peter was a liar and a bad actor to boot, and Tony would definitely be messing around with his Netflix preferences when they got back to the tower in retaliation.

In that moment, however, he contented himself with responding to Peter’s “Aw, you guys are just too cute” with a raised middle finger and a—

“Careful kid, or I’ll start reciting certain text messages that you’ve sent me in the past.”

Peter gasped in horror. “You wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” said Steve, looking up in amusement from his conversation with Guardians. “You weren’t around for the creation of the Avengers Twitter account, but believe me when I say that it certainly wasn’t born in peaceful circumstances.”

“I need to know that story,” Peter said seriously.

“Then quit your yapping and you might live to hear it,” Tony snapped.

Meanwhile Loki, rather predictably, had begun to laugh. It wasn’t the rare infectious peels that Tony
had come to love, but rather a low snicker that had Tony huffing in exasperation.

“Come now, my dear,” said Loki, his eyes appraising the group as a whole. “We are rather neglecting the others. You are not the only person who I have not seen in a while, after all.”

Despite his words, Tony noted that Loki didn’t release his embrace even slightly.

“Yeah exactly,” said Peter, bounding a little closer. “Don’t hog the Asgardian, Mr Stark! I want to hug him too!”

For a moment Tony actually thought the kid was going to do it– he leapt forward with enthusiasm and a wide, wide grin, but thankfully (and wisely) paused before colliding with the still entwined pair.

“It is good to see you, Peter,” said Loki, shifting the arm not holding the sceptre to offer Peter a small pat on the shoulder. “Thank you for keeping Anthony alive while I was gone.”

Tony was about to complain, but the opportunity was stolen from him as Quill chose that moment to speak up.

“Not that this isn’t sweet and all,” he said, “but we are on a ship that is still heading to Thanos’ home world. As such, we’re going to head off. We need to find a better way of getting in to find Gamora.”

“Seconded,” said Rocket. Drax grumbled and complained, but followed nonetheless. Mantis waved to them as she turned as well.

“Nice meeting you,” said Peter, returning the wave.

Thinking that nice was not the adjective that he would have used, Tony was about to turn to Loki and ask him if he could take them all back to their own beautiful blue planet when he was struck with another idea.

The Guardians were leaving, which, obviously, meant that they had a method of doing so– and after all, the Guardians had boarded Maw’s ship somehow, and Tony doubted that they had the ability to teleport like Loki. If they did, the universe surely would have met its end some time ago. That meant that the Guardians must have a ship of their own, which in turn meant that they could get back to Earth. Tony didn’t know what was waiting for them all back at home, but he was sure that they were going to need all of the help that they could get.

“Wait,” he called out, reluctantly pulling away from Loki in order to step toward the retreating Guardians. He could feel the others’ gaze on his back but held firm, sure that they would catch on quickly and even agree with what he was doing. “This Gamora you guys are looking for. She was taken by Thanos, right?”

Quill froze, his hands tightening into fists by his sides. But, surprisingly, it was Drax who responded, his voice little more than a low growl.

“Yes,” he said. “Gamora was Thanos’ daughter, and she knows something that he wants. He took her to get it. She wanted Quill to kill her first, but—“

“Stop,” Quill snapped, and Tony knew better than to pry further on that front. He could fill in the blanks enough to paint a pretty dark picture regardless.

“So you want to get her back— that’s why you came onto this ship,” said Tony. “Your plan was what? To barge in here, hope that no one noticed and then infiltrate Titan to find her, probably try to
kill any guards and then simply pluck Gamora from wherever she was being kept?”

“Yes,” said Mantis. “How did you know?”

Deciding to disregard her shock at Tony’s frankly simple deduction, he continued. “Pretty crappy plan,” he said, fully believing it to be true. And not just because any ‘guards’ surrounding Thanos’ purported favourite daughter was more than likely to be Thanos himself, but also because— “Thanos isn’t going to be on Titan. I mean, sure, Maw was taking us there so he could hand– **me** over to Thanos, but he’s not going to be sitting around at home when there’s bigger fish to fry. That information Gamora has– any idea on what it is?”

“I can guess,” Quill said darkly. “But I’m not going to tell you.”

That was all right. Tony could guess, too.

“You said you saw Thor on Knowhere,” Tony said to slightly change the subject, causing Loki to shift behind him. “So you were there for the Aether, weren’t you?”

“No,” said Mantis. “What is an… Aether?”

“The Reality Stone,” said Loki, stepping forward to stand beside Tony. His posture was relaxed, his right hand loose around the sceptre with a nonchalance that Tony knew to be deceptive. “I know who you are. You are those who kept the Power Stone from the rebel Kree and gave it to the Nova Corps. Is that how you came to know that Thanos was collecting them?”

“So we heard that Xandar was pretty much destroyed and this idiot–” said Rocket, jabbing his weapon in Quill’s direction, “thought it would be a good idea to go and check on the Collector, since we were at least sixty per cent sure that he had another one—“

“You saw his face when he saw the Power Stone that first time,” Quill interrupted. “There was no way he hadn’t seen one before. Besides, Gamora said she’d heard a rumour—“

“They should have known that the Collector would **brag**, ” Loki groaned, casting his eyes skyward. “Sif should have known better. Why did I not stop them, direct them elsewhere?”

“I don’t think it would have made much of a difference,” Tony muttered, leaning in, his fingers curling around Loki’s as he did so. “Thanos would have gone after it either way.” Then, louder, he said— “That’s not what matters. You’ve already told us that Thanos got the Reality Stone. He’s got two of six— he’s not going to stop there. I think I know where he’s going to be, and I think that if we all fight him together– we’re going to have more of a chance.”

“I will come with you,” said Drax. “Ronan would not have been able to kill my wife and daughter without the power that Thanos granted him, and for that, Thanos will pay. I will have my revenge, and you Avengers shall help me get it.”

“Sure, big guy,” said Tony. “But, see, we don’t have a ship. I was hoping that we could come with you.”

“You don’t need a ship to get home,” Quill accused, and at first Tony was worried that Quill knew what Tony had hidden in his reactor. But then Quill pointed to Tony’s right and said– “You have him.”

Loki bristled at being singled out, but it seemed to be more with pride than anything else.

“Oh?” Loki asked, tilting his head in that pensive way that always spelled trouble. “What leads you
to say so?”

“I said before that I know who you are, and I meant it,” said Quill. “Gamora told me all about you—the Asgardian prince who joined Thanos only to gain some power of his own.”

“She thought I joined Thanos?” Loki snorted. “And I thought her to be intelligent.”

Quill snarled and shifted as if to charge forward.

“Stop!” Peter shouted to them all. “Why aren’t you listening? It’s like Mr Stark said— if we stand together we have more of a chance of winning. We can’t fight him on our own. Are you going to help us, or not?”

“Oh no,” said Rocket, shaking his head and backing away. “I’m not going anywhere near that crazy purple maniac. I’m not going to risk my life for a fight that isn’t mine.”

“Then why are you here?” Tony asked in confusion.

“And besides, this is everyone’s fight,” Steve piped up. “If Thanos gets his hands on all the Stones… well, I’m sure you know better than us what will happen.”

“Gamora said that Thanos wants to wipe out half of the universe, because he does not believe there is enough resources for everyone,” Drax told them.

“Well. That’s… misguided,” said Tony. “But I suppose that it also nicely supports Cap’s point.”

“And mine,” Rocket argued. “If he wants to kill half of us, it’s all the more reason to stay far away.”

Groot voiced what was apparently agreement with Rocket’s point if the racoon’s dramatic “thank you” was anything to go by, but Drax still seemed to want a chance at revenge, and Mantis was nodding thoughtfully.

“I think we should help,” she said. “We are good at saving people.”

“I am Groot.”

“Oh, come on,” Rocket complained. “You were literally just on my side.”

Groot, it seemed, believed himself to be on everyone’s side, though he had also buried his nose in what appeared to be a mid-90s game console at some point, so there was every chance that he didn’t actually know what was going on.

It looked like it was going to come down to Quill, who had spent the majority of the conversation glaring around at them all, his hands still in tight fists, and was even now turning to walk away. Tony knew that if Quill left, all the Guardians would follow him, even Drax. They needed to get Quill onside, but the guy was clearly stubborn, and was not willing to leave his own crusade to save his girlfriend when there was a chance that Tony could be wrong. He wasn’t going to go to Earth when he had no reason to believe that it would help him save Gamora, and there was nothing Tony could do to change that.

But on that note— there was one more thing that he could try. It was a gamble, because Tony still didn’t really trust the Guardians. But if it worked, he thought that it would probably be worth it.

“Earth has the Time Stone,” Tony said, and Quill froze in his tracks. Sensing blood in the water, Tony added— “Come on, Quill, you know what that means.”
Quill turned back to face Tony, his expression void of his usual humour. When he answered, his voice was harsh, firm, and determined, the words spat out like something halfway between a battle cry and a prayer.

“It means,” he said, “that Earth has bait.”

“Earth is already preparing for an attack,” Loki added. “No doubt JARVIS and Dr Banner have detected an incoming threat. Thanos is already on his way to Earth. If you want information about Gamora, coming with us is your best bet.”

“Earth is what?” asked Peter.

“I saw the Avengers when I was searching for your location upon Hlidskjalf,” Loki told them. At their confused looks, he added— “The throne of Asgard. Its magic allows the person seated upon it to view anywhere in the whole of the Nine Realms. I saw the remaining Avengers and a few others I did not recognise discussing an imminent attack, and how best to proceed with you three missing. They had not begun to fight yet, but it did not look like it was going to be long.”

“All right, we need to get back stat,” said Tony, and Steve nodded in agreement.

“Okay,” said Quill. “We will come with you to Earth. But when we find Thanos— he is mine.”

“You are not the only one to hold a quarrel with Thanos,” Loki said harshly. “And I do not think anyone should hesitate on the final blow. If you have a killing shot, you take it. Do not pause to savour the moment, for he will take advantage of that.” Loki’s gaze also turned to Drax, who looked like Loki had stolen his favourite toy.

“Amen to that,” Quill said. “The bastard doesn’t deserve to stay on this plane of existence for a moment longer than he has to. You won’t have to worry about me hesitating.”

After that, the Guardians led the four Avengers to their ship, which was precariously parked halfway into an airlock. Rocket had grumbled and complained all the way there, but he seemed happy enough when Peter promised to let him look at his web shooters. Tony very much doubted the wisdom of that idea, but since it stopped the grumbling he let it be.

The ship itself was… filthy, but in a lived-in kind of way, and it was certainly sleeker than Maw’s. It was smaller, too, and while it likely fit the group of Guardians quite easily, with an added teenager, super soldier, god, and mechanic, the space felt a little cramped. Tony figured he wouldn’t have to put up with it for long, though. Steve estimated that he had been on Maw’s ship for two hours, and Quill boasted that the Milano was far faster than any piece of junk Thanos’ minions would be able to get their hands on. Then again, this was Quill— from what Tony had seen so far it seemed possible that the guy could be overcompensating.

No more than two hours, though.

Quill and Rocket fought over who would be steering the ship at first, but when Loki offered his own piloting skills they both agreed to engage autopilot and sit to discuss strategy. Everyone found a spot to sit in what was probably the eating area of the ship— there weren’t enough chairs around the table, but Peter strung himself a web swing from the roof, and Rocket sat on the armrest of Groot’s chair. Tony had to be dragged away from the windows to join in – he’d had nightmares about space, sure, but he couldn’t deny that it was pretty and he was geeking out a little – but a short whisper into his ear about future plans and ‘all the time in the world’ had Tony following Loki to join the others of his own free will. Well, that and the fact that he still hadn’t let go of Loki’s hand. All the chairs were taken by that time, but Tony was quite happy to perch next to Loki on the workbench against the
wall. And if it meant that he could lean slightly into Loki’s side—well, that was just all the better.

Maybe Peter was right after all. Dear god, Tony had gone soft.

Whatever. Tony was willing to own it.

“So you guys said that Earth has the Time Stone,” said Quill once they were all finally settled. He eyed them all individually, his gaze first passing over Tony, who stared back impassively—then Steve, who didn’t react beyond a small smile—before coming to rest on Peter. “Do you have any others?” Quill asked.

“No,” Peter said immediately, shaking his head with all the vigour of a child who had been asked if they had eaten the last cookie.

A smirk curled at the corner of Quill’s lips.

Rocket laughed. “Okay kid, sure,” he said. Then he looked to Steve. “So, other than the Time Stone, which one do you have?”

Peter groaned.

“I don’t have any of them,” Steve replied gravely while Tony shot Peter a glare. “There are only six in the whole universe, after all. How high are the chances that more than one would end up on our planet?”

“Not very high at all,” said Drax. Then he looked to Mantis. “Math is easy when you know how.”

“Exactly,” Steve agreed.

“I’m willing to bet that the Time Stone will be the most useful, anyway,” Tony said in an attempt to redirect the conversation. “I mean, come on—it’s essentially a reset button. Mess something up? Do it again.”

“Careful, Mr Stark,” said Peter, kicking his legs to swing softly in his web. “Awful things happen to wizards who meddle with time.”

“Well, lucky we’re not wizards then,” Tony pointed out. “Hey, maybe we should take the Time Stone away from Strange.”

“Peter isn’t wrong, Anthony,” said Loki. “The Time Stone should not simply be used that way. It is useful for a great many things—time bubbles, loops, altering a person’s perception of time or the way that they interact with the time stream. But to use it to reverse a whole event while retaining the memory? That is just asking for the creation of a dangerous anomaly.”

“Well, Strange did it,” Tony muttered under his breath, able to hear the petulance himself but not really caring.

“I think I would enjoy meeting this Strange,” said Loki, and from the glint in his eye Tony knew that would be a meeting that everyone would enjoy—except, perhaps, Strange himself.

“Hey, could someone use the Time Stone to Time Travel?” Quill asked. “Like Marty McFly?”

“Theoretically,” Loki allowed, unfazed by the reference— but then, it wouldn’t be all that surprising if JARVIS had introduced Loki to the movie back with the poorly planned ‘educational’ playlist. “I have not heard of it being attempted. I believe the risks are too great.”
“Spoil sport,” Quill muttered, though his tone was far more disappointed than what his words themselves warranted. Tony wondered what it was that Quill so desperately wished to change. Perhaps it had something to do with Gamora, or perhaps it was something else entirely.

“I think I’d want the Reality Stone,” Peter said thoughtfully. “It would be so awesome! You could change anything into anything you wanted! Imagine—Hogwarts’ great hall instead of the cafeteria! A Death Star over Queens to cancel school for a day! Cthulhu rising from the East River to scare the tourists!”

“I don’t think my translator is working,” said Mantis, poking at her neck.

“And hey, that’s just the fake stuff,” Peter continued. “You could actually change the world, right? Clean water for everyone, houses for anyone who needed one, unlimited resources for animal rescue shelters!”

Wow. The kid was just too pure.

“Just like the short man, I think I would also choose the Time Stone,” said Drax. “So that I could kill Thanos over and over. Just once would not be enough.”

And okay, insulting. Tony knew he wasn’t a giant but just because he spent most of his time with the likes of Loki and Steve did not make him short. His height was pretty well average, thank you very much.

“Okay,” said Peter, the slow pronunciation of the word most likely due to his sympathetic outrage at Tony unfairly being called short. “Um. What about you, Rocket?”

“This isn’t some BuzzFeed quiz, kid,” Tony broke in, but he was ignored as Rocket said—

“I’d want the Space Stone, obviously. I would say Power but only an idiot would put something like that in their pocket—”

“This from the guy who regularly leaves bombs under the kitchen sink,” muttered Quill.

“Where do you keep your bombs then?” Rocket asked impertinently.

Quill was saved from having to answer by Groot piping up with his usual—“I am Groot.”

“Why would you pick the Soul Stone?” Rocket asked, turning to the tree incredulously. “That’s the lamest one there is. What’s the point of manipulating souls? They don’t do anything.”

“I think I would choose the Mind Stone,” Mantis piped up. “I think it would work well with my powers.”

“And you, Cap?” Peter asked, a curious tilt to the question.

“I would just want whichever would help us defeat Thanos,” Steve replied.

“Such as?” probed Rocket. “I’ll ask again. Which one do you have?”

“We don’t have one,” said Peter. “Not a single one.”

“Oh,” said Quill, his eyes widening in faux innocence as he leaned forward against the table. “Okay, so— which ones do you have? Plural?”

“Peter,” Loki groaned. “Remind me to give you lessons on lying when we get back to Midgard.”
“No,” Tony said quickly. “You will not. There is no way that will end well—“

“He has to grow up eventually, Anthony,” said Loki, patting him consolingly on the knee.

“Oh, but it hurts to think on it,” Tony sighed, grinning when Peter snickered. “But please, Loki. He doesn’t need your skills. One of you is enough.”

“Is it?” Loki asked curiously, licking his lips.

“Yes,” Tony said adamantly, though to be honest his brain power was not focused on his reply. “More than.”

The smile on Loki’s lips was just too wicked to leave alone, and Tony was already close enough that all he had to do was tilt up is chin and press their mouths together. He blamed the length of time since his last proper kiss for the way that he immediately deepened it but Loki responded just as eagerly, both of them unheeding of the others’ presence in the room. Tony moaned and shifted closer, almost but not quite sliding into Loki’s lap as he felt fingers digging into his hips hard enough to leave a bruise.

“I do not permit sex on this ship,” Quill said loudly, and the interruption was enough for Tony to pull back but not release his hold.

“That’s not true,” Drax said, and Mantis nodded firmly beside him.

“Drax is right,” she said unnecessarily. Quill glared at them both.

“I like you two,” said Tony, nodding to each of them. Mantis blushed and covered her face, and Drax grinned wide and smug at Quill, who merely rolled his eyes. Tony decided to take it as a win.

He settled back against Loki’s side again, not caring that the others were grumbling as they began to move to separate areas. Rocket and Quill went to continue to argue over piloting, Drax, Mantis and Steve followed them to the cockpit, while Peter raced to the nearest window and Groot headed further into the ship. Tony was perfectly content to stay right where he was, happy to close his eyes and bask in the cool warmth of Loki.

Tony could feel Loki’s hand rubbing small circles into his side, but he didn’t mind– he contented himself with running his own down Loki’s other arm, absentmindedly tracing soft patterns down the leather and onto the bare skin at his wrist, pausing only when his fingers caught on the edge of the golden sceptre.

Opening his eyes again, Tony took a moment to examine the newly acquired weapon. It was an elegant thing, sleeker than the last one and entirely gold. It had only the one blade though there was something in the curve of it and in the central space which held the Mind Stone that was reminiscent of the sceptre the Avengers had fought to liberate from HYDRA, as if twin blades had been curled together to create a single, deadly weapon. It was clearly well crafted, though from what metal Tony couldn’t say, which made him quite sure that it wasn’t anything that could be found on Earth.

Tony couldn’t deny the fact that he was curious.

“So, where did you get the sceptre?” Tony asked. “Didn’t think you’d have time to be picking up bling while tracking down the Aether.”

It was as if Tony had spoken some kind of insult rather than an innocent attempt to catch up on the happenings of the past few days. Loki’s whole body flinched away from Tony’s, his knuckles whitening as they tightened around the sceptre. Tony felt Loki’s left arm unwind from around his
waist so that Loki could grasp the weapon with both hands, and his eyes blazed with a sudden anger that seemed to come from nowhere. It didn’t make any sense, and Tony was instantly on guard.

“Niðavellir.” Loki spat the word as if it were a curse, and it was that more than the word itself that jogged Tony’s memory.

“That’s where…” Tony looked back to Loki’s face, but he had averted his gaze. “Loki, why hell did you go there?”

“Thor asked me to.”

“Thor did what?” Tony asked incredulously. “Doesn’t he know—“

“He didn’t,” Loki said harshly, and Tony knew he wasn’t talking about the torture itself. Thor just hadn’t known how something like that could affect a person. As if sensing Tony’s thoughts, Loki finally met his gaze, a cruel parody of a smile curling his lips as he added– “He does now.”

“Good,” said Tony, though he knew that such a conversation between the two turbulent brothers must have been anything but easy. “I’m glad.”

The reassurance didn’t seem to do anything to help though, as Loki still sat straight and rigid, the smallest of tremors running through his arms.

“Hey.” Slowly, Tony reached back out Loki, touching his fingers gently to the back of Loki’s left hand. He once again began tracing the soft patterns that he had earlier, and angled his body so that it was a simple thing to curl his other arm around Loki’s shoulders. “It’s all right, it’s just me.”

Loki shuddered, the tension bleeding from his body as his shoulders slumped and he finally relaxed into Tony’s embrace.

“I hate that Thor is able to do this to me,” Loki said, his words less of a growl and more of a defeated whisper. “I do not understand– I believed myself long past this.”

“You can’t just move past something like that,” Tony said. “I know it’s been a very long time, longer than I could comprehend– but that doesn’t matter.”

“It should,” Loki muttered. “I shouldn’t be this weak—“

“Have I told you recently that I love you?” Tony asked, cutting Loki off before he could get any more self-depreciative. “Because I do, and it’s very important to me that you know that.”

“You say it often enough that it is impossible to forget,” Loki replied, and Tony was relieved to see a small smile curve the corner of Loki’s lips. “You’re beginning to become repetitive.”

“We can’t have that,” Tony agreed. “Maybe I need to come up with something else– ooh, I know.” Tony sat up straight, giving Loki a wink when the god narrowed his eyes slightly in suspicion. “You are the most important thing in my life,” Tony said dramatically. “The dearest to my heart. I don’t only love you, I adore you. There isn’t a single thing about you that I would ever want to change, except perhaps the fact that you put yourself down all the time—“

“Anthony—“ Loki started in exasperation, but Tony was far from done.

“You are beautiful, Loki– even when you barge into my workshop and turn my own bots against me in a conspiracy to force me into a so called ‘healthy’ sleep schedule, I still look upon you with the utmost wonder—“
“Stop,” Loki snorted, pushing lightly on Tony’s shoulder. “I get it.”

“Do you?” Tony asked, his tone turning serious. Loki’s lips parted, his tongue no doubt about to deliver something snarky, but Tony interrupted. “This is important to me. I know you’re an arrogant asshole most of the time—“

“Oh, that gels with the earlier description,” Loki agreed sardonically.

“—but… you said once that… that you have more reason to try now than you used to,” Tony said slowly, his mind casting back to that fateful conversation in the workshop of Avengers’ Tower, when both of them had still been reeling from the apparent loss of JARVIS and trying to hold on to what little they had left.

Tony had asked if Loki could promise to stay, and Loki had replied that he could promise to try…and that he *had more reason than before.*

At the time he had thought Loki had been merely answering Tony’s question as it had been asked, that Loki had been promising to try to physically stay with Tony by not leaving, by not getting hurt. But… more recently, and as he had come to learn more about both Loki’s past and Loki himself, Tony had begun to wonder if Loki’s words had meant something a little darker.

“I think about that a lot, you know?” He said, trying and failing to catch Loki’s gaze. “Because I don’t think you were just talking about a reason to stay with me by staying on Midgard– I think you were talking about a reason to stay with me in this *life.*”

“That was never—“ Loki looked down again and swallowed hard, the slight rasp in his voice stretching the words painfully. “It was never my intention.”

As simple and reluctant as it was, the statement sent a shard of ice through Tony’s heart. From Loki’s retelling of what had happened on the Bifröst at the end of his short term as Asgard’s regent and after hearing Thor’s own version of the story, Tony had already been fairly sure of what had happened. But this… this *admission* was more painful than Tony thought he could bear.

Tony wasn’t entirely sure what had made him bring it up, but the mention of Niðavellir had been enough to put him on his guard, and he had known immediately what sort of havoc that might have wreaked on Loki’s mind.

Because Tony had *been* there. He’d had more low points than anyone had a right to, and while he had never truly considered actively… ending things, there had been moments. Moments when he had been deep in a self destructive spiral, where he had known that he was on the cusp of alcohol poisoning, or had been aware enough to recognise that playing with explosives after a bottle or four was most likely to end badly– moments where he had simply shrugged and thought, *well, what the hell?* No, he’d never truly thought about the act itself, but he couldn’t even count on his fingers the number of times when he just hadn’t really cared either way.

That had come to change, though. Pepper and Rhodey had helped him through, forced him to see that there was still some brightness in the world if only he looked hard enough. Loki had never had a Pepper or a Rhodey– from what Tony could tell, the closest he came to true friend was Thor, and Thor was… well, he *tried,* but he had never quite met the mark. Loki had said many times that Tony made him happy and Tony honestly believed that, but if there was even a chance that the visit to Niðavellir had shaken Loki’s self worth then Tony knew that he had to make sure that Loki came out of it okay.

“I don’t want to make you talk about this,” Tony said. “Not here, not now– certainly not when you
Loki pushed off the workbench they were seated on and moved across the room, his whole posture tense as he began to pace. Tony stayed where he was, wanting nothing more than to reach out and comfort but trusting that if Loki felt that he needed the contact, he would be comfortable enough to come back to Tony himself. But that didn’t mean that Tony was going to remain silent while Loki was probably trying to convince himself that Tony was wrong.

“I don’t know all of what happened on Asgard, and what happened with Thor, but I know that I will always stand with you,” Tony said firmly, refusing to soften his tone. “You’ve done some pretty shitty things, and you’ve had some pretty shitty things done to you, and I think it’s all compounded a bit. But you know I’m always here, right?”

“Yes,” Loki said without turning. “I do know that. But I shouldn’t need to rely on you. I should be able to stand on my own.”

Tony shook his head. “It’s not weakness—”

“I am stronger than this,” Loki snarled. “I survived the dwarves, I survived what they did to me—then I went back to Niðavellir and returned with a weapon powerful enough to help us defeat Thanos. I won.” Loki finally turned to face Tony, his arms outstretched in a gesture that pleaded for validation. “I came out on top. So why does it all still bother me so? I don’t want them to hold this power over me.”

“Well, you said it yourself,” said Tony. “You don’t… don’t let it beat you. You have to see it as a phoenix metaphor, stay on top by using what you’ve learned.”

“I know that,” Loki groaned. “I did– I know that what happened was a good thing—”

“No,” Tony said immediately. “That’s not what I’m trying to say at all. What happened to you fucking sucked, okay? And that your family allowed it to happen, that they played a part in it is some seriously messed up shit that ranks even higher than anything my father ever did– and don’t you dare say that it was maybe because you weren’t their real family.” Tony ordered pre-emptively, catching the familiar depressed sheen in Loki’s gaze. “You know that isn’t the case. And I know that you can make the distinction between being glad for a lesson, but acknowledging that what happened was both shitty and not your fault. It’s not a weakness to ask for help,” Tony said, restating the lesson that he himself had had drilled into his head by friends who knew better than to leave an open wound to fester. “I’m always going to be here.”

“I know that,” Loki said again, stronger this time as he stepped back toward Tony—still not properly approaching, but no longer turned away. “I have you, now. I’m all right.”

“It’s just…” Tony looked down to his own hands, twisting together in his lap. “I know we’ve talked about this a lot, and I don’t mean to be repetitive. I know you’ve said since then that you mean to stay with me now, and I believe it. But with Thanos out there…” Tony swallowed hard, finally acknowledging to himself why he had decided that now, on the Guardians’ ship, seated upon a disgusting bench and deep in the middle of space was the perfect moment to open his chest and tear out everything that had been eating at him. His experience with Maw hadn’t necessarily been anything new but it was enough to worry him, to cement the seriousness of the situation in a way that he had attempted intellectually but that hadn’t been possible without that little dash of realism and fear.

Before, Tony’s mind had been full of that horrific image of Thanos crushing Loki with a single
blow, and although he knew it was a fabrication brewed from a combination of his nightmares and Wanda Maximoff’s maliciousness, he also knew that it was something that could easily come to pass. He had fought hard to avoid it, had even risked a great deal to try and make the UN understand the situation just as he did. But now, Tony had proof that it could go the other way, that he might not be the one left alone at the end of it all-- and he was surprised to find that it worried him almost as much as the alternative. He didn’t want Thanos to take away the happiness that he had managed to forge in recent years.

“I just…” Tony grit his teeth, the emotionality of it making the words difficult to force up his throat. But it needed to be said. “I know it makes me seem clingy or whatever, but I need to know that you’re going to be okay if—“

“That’s not going to happen,” Loki interrupted, his gaze lingering on the dried blood that still stained Tony’s hairline, even though the wounds were now mostly healed. “I won’t let it.”

“But if it did,” Tony stressed. “Just want to know that you’d be all right.”

Slowly, Loki moved back to the workbench, not sitting but standing close enough that he pressed against Tony’s knees. Tony hooked his ankles around the back of Loki’s thighs to draw him in for a much needed hug, his arms coming to rest at Loki’s waist, his eyes falling closed. Loki didn’t speak, but merely accepted the embrace and leaned in thankfully, pressing his face to Tony’s shoulder and sighing with a breathy exhale. The sceptre had left Loki’s hands, was probably on the bench beside them somewhere-- but Tony didn’t really care, focused as he was on the feeling of Loki’s arms fitting snugly over his own.

“I’m sorry for bringing this all up,” Tony murmured, raising one of his hands to absentmindedly smooth Loki’s hair. “Really put a damper on the mood, huh?”

“No,” Loki said, his reply muffled in Tony’s shoulder. “None of this is your fault.”

“Not yours, either,” Tony groaned. “I am going to kill Thor when I next see him.”

“Don’t,” Loki muttered. “I’m not done with him yet.”

“But after that?” Tony asked. “Can I have a go then?”

Loki snorted. “Please. Be my guest.”

“I am sorry,” Tony said again. “I didn’t mean to get so preachy. That can’t have helped.”

“You’re right that I don’t want to talk about it myself,” Loki said after a short pause. “But to hear you say those things… it’s nice. I know that you care.”

The words had Tony tightening his grip and pressing a kiss to Loki’s hair, more to reassure himself than in an attempt to comfort, though he did hope that it would achieve both. They stayed there for a while, clinging to each other in the near silence of the ship, the sense of tranquillity not broken but only heightened by the soft murmur of voices from the cockpit and the soothing hum of the engine. Tony knew that they both just needed the connection, that they could both take solace from the touch.

“I really did miss you,” Loki said softly, lifting his head to catch Tony’s eye. “You manage to draw me from my own mind more than anyone else can. More than you know.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” said Tony. “I’m a top notch ego coach, just you—“
Loki cut him off with a kiss, and Tony most definitely did not mind. Their movements were slow this time, with none of the desperation from before though the passion as most certainly still there. It wasn’t so much of an I missed you as it was an I’m glad that you’re here, a subtle difference that brought a slice of cheer to something otherwise sad, a sweet continuation of the soft greeting that had been interrupted by the direness of circumstance.

“I missed you too, you know,” Tony said as they paused for breath. “I don’t think I said that earlier.”

“You didn’t need to,” said Loki, and it was nice to hear a touch of his usual arrogance slip back into his words despite their obvious sincerity.

Tony smiled, and was just leaning in to press their lips back together when—

“That’s disgusting,” said Rocket. He was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, his lips pulled over his sharp teeth in a sneer.

“How long have you been standing there?” Tony asked indignantly, glaring at the racoon while Loki sighed in annoyance.

“Long enough,” came the disgruntled reply. “Don’t you guys ever do anything useful with your time?”

“This morning I used an Infinity Stone to reignite a neutron star and restart all of the forges of Niðavellir,” Loki said, his shoulders shrugging with false humility.

“Oh,” said Rocket, his eyes widening as he looked at Loki with a newly appreciative gaze. “I suppose that is being productive.”

“Do you exist solely to be annoying?” Tony asked. Honestly, he’d been interrupted more by Guardians in a couple of hours than he probably had before by anyone other than JARVIS.

“No,” Rocket replied indignantly. “I’m also pretty good at exploding things.”

“Also a worthy skill,” said Loki, nodding in mock seriousness. “Is that why you’re here? Because I warn you that both Anthony and I are also quite well versed in pyrotechnics.”

Rocket shook his head with a toothy grin. “Actually, I came to tell you guys that we’ve made it to Earth.”

Tony was on his feet in an instant, pausing only long enough to check that Loki was following before charging into the already crowded cockpit. Most of the occupants were looking out the window worriedly.

“Oh, great,” Rocket groaned as he too leaned over to look. “We’re all going to die.”

“Think of it this way,” Tony suggested, staring down at the mess below with wide, disbelieving eyes. “At least when we go out, it will be in a very pretty explosion.”

“Why the hell would he want to think of it that way?” Quill demanded. “That doesn’t help!”

“We’re not going to die,” said Steve. “Honestly. They won’t fire on us without good reason.”

“You so sure about that, Cap?” Tony asked, gesturing to the ground where the muzzles of at least four M1 Abrams tanks – nothing as advanced as what Tony once produced, but certainly advanced enough to blow the Milano out of the sky – were aimed in their direction.
That was okay, though, because if there was anything Tony was good at, it was getting out of a sticky situation. And this time, he had Loki back by his side to help. They were going to be just fine.

“All right,” said Tony. “I think I have a plan. Who’s ready to go and help the humans kick Thanos’ ass?”

“Kicking his ass would not be very effective,” Drax said, his eyes narrowing. He raised his hand and curled it slowly into a fist as he said— “I plan to take him by his throat and squeeze hard until he is most definitely dead.”

Peter slowly slid sideways until Steve was between him and the large alien.

“Awesome,” said Tony, shrugging in agreement and kind of glad, to be honest, that Loki’s little pep talk earlier had been taken seriously. “Let’s go do this thing.”
They'll find a lion

Chapter Summary

“Well,” Bruce said, shrugging almost helplessly as he gestured around at the chaos. “You know. Aliens.”

“Again,” Peter groaned.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was an absolute monster. Believe it or not, I have cut it in half. So to everyone who I told that it would get less sad after this one– I'm sorry, I guess I lied? Just shift what I said over to the next chapter, guys.

Tony volunteered to go down to Earth first.

He wasn’t entirely keen on the idea, but he knew that someone had to. The military operation that seemed to be taking place in the middle of Times Square was going to shoot them out of the sky if they didn’t do something, he didn’t trust the Guardians to refrain from doing anything rash if left unsupervised, and he didn’t trust himself to stay with them alone.

Besides, if he could claim that Captain America was on the ship with the aliens, it would be more likely to deter the army from shooting than if he had remained on board as a hasty collateral, and then Steve could keep an eye on the aliens while he went to deal with the military. As much as Steve had always been a soldier with more than enough guts to stand up to superior officers, Tony had been dealing with them in a business capacity for far longer in terms of years lived, and he’d always had a knack for needling what he wants out of any discussion.

Steve might have had more respect, but Tony was Iron Man, damn it. He’d make them listen.

And if they didn’t– well. He was sure that Loki would be able to help with that.

It was clear that Loki hadn’t entirely recovered from their discussion on board the Milano– there had still been a pinch of distress to the set of his mouth and in the tightness of his jaw, but as soon as he had laid eyes on the mess of soldiers and tanks out of the window, Loki’s expression had smoothed with cool professionalism. Tony knew that Loki would be all right, that there would be no way the emotions that had been brought up would get in the way of what needed to be done. It wasn’t a denial, or an unhealthy repression– it was merely a reassignment of priorities to match the circumstance. Loki was a survivor, and Tony knew that they both would make it out of the other side okay.

The Trickster agreed to ferry Tony and Peter - who insisted on not being left behind - down to street level, though the corner of his lips quirked in what Tony could only describe as amused concern at the question. Before they left, Tony pre-emptively used Loki’s phone to send out a message to all the Avengers on the ground. They were no doubt busy with the ridiculously huge spaceship Tony could
see floating a mile to the north and a fair bit higher than the Milano, though he hoped that at least one would be able to take the time to come and help explain things.

They landed right in the middle of a group of soldiers, and it was a moment (that stretched hilariously yet slightly worryingly) before they were brought to their senses and raised their loaded weapons to the intruders with a yell.

Peter immediately had both hands above his head as he squealed—“Don’t shoot, I’m an Avenger!”

Loki, meanwhile, was already standing in a protective position, his sceptre held loosely behind him in his right hand, his left extended forward and gleaming with the bright colour of his seiðr.

“Whoa,” said Tony, raising his own hands not in surrender but in a placating gesture. “Come on, guys. You know who I am.”

“Mr Stark.” The commanding officer pushed to the front of the line, her name tape and the silver leaves on her shoulders identifying her as Lieutenant Colonel Bronson. She passed her gaze over Loki and Spider-Man but did not comment, turning her focus back to Tony. “We were under the impression that you had been abducted.”

Tony couldn’t help flashing her a quick grin. “Yeah, by aliens. I wouldn’t recommend it, it didn’t live up to the hype. Probing was limited and so not fun.”

Peter made a noise that wasn’t quite halfway between a retch and a groan, and Loki allowed his predatory pose to relax at the quip. However, Tony wasn’t fooled—he could tell by the watchfulness in Loki’s expression, the way that his eyes flickered around the area, and the flex of his fingers against the metal of the sceptre that he had not properly relaxed in the slightest.

The Lieutenant Colonel didn’t respond to Tony’s attempt to lighten the situation at all. “We’re preparing for an attack.” Her words were quick but unhurried, infused with sternness appropriate to the circumstance but not unkind. “The Avengers called for back up— they have been preparing from their Tower.” She paused. “Why didn’t you go there, first?”

“We were trying to,” Tony admitted. “Then you pointed your guns at us.”

Bronson frowned. “At you?”

Peter gestured wildly to the circle of soldiers who were definitely still aiming at them, but Bronson only spared him a glance before turning right back to Tony, who looked pointedly to the tanks that were still trained on the sky.

It took a moment for her to get it, then she looked to the Milano, raising her brows.

“Yeah,” said Tony. “So, if you could call your men off—“

“Stand down,” Bronson called. The soldiers standing around immediately began to move, their weapons lowered and their steps quickening as they rushed off to do whatever they had been assigned before. It was an instant mess of coordinated turmoil, and Tony realised that there was an urgency here that he had missed in his initial assessment. The tanks, however, kept the Milano within their crosshairs, and when Tony asked again for the weapons to be called off, Bronson gave him an unimpressed look.

“Captain America is on that ship,” Tony told her with a casual shrug. “You really want to be responsible for shooting him down?”
Tony was half expecting Bronson to call it as a bluff, but she merely observed him for a moment, before issuing another shouted order. The tanks moved slowly, but they moved, repositioning their aim to the other, far more menacing ship still waiting above the city.

“I don’t have the time to brief you properly,” Bronson said, her tone now dismissive. “Intel collected by your team states we have little time. You need to get in contact with the other Avengers.”

“Yeah, I tried that—” Tony started, but Bronson was already gone, folding into the crowd with further orders falling form her lips. Tony could understand that– alien invasions were hectic for everyone, he supposed, and she had a job to do. But he needed more of an explanation if he was going to coordinate with the rest of the team.

“I’ll let the Guardians know they’re safe,” Loki said, turning to Tony as he shifted the sceptre into his left hand and reached out with his now empty right. He touched his fingers to the back of Tony’s hand, allowing them to linger there for a moment of tenderness before he vanished in a flash of green. Tony felt the loss almost immediately, but shrugged it off. Loki would be back– it was just the pre-battle worry that was making him go soft, this time.

But it was only when Tony turned back to Peter that he realised Loki had taken his phone with him, and that they were going to need some other way to find out what was happening.

The soldiers Tony tried to talk to mostly ignored him, their eyes considering him with the awe-struck curiosity he was used to for only a moment before their own professionalism and duty moved them along. They didn’t have time for a couple of superheroes. He supposed they would just have to wait for the Avengers to come to them.

“This isn’t going to be good, Mr Stark,” Peter said as they were shuffled around in the movements. Tony had his hand on the kid’s metal-encased shoulder in an attempt not to be separated, but still.

“You’re going to have to explain the Guardians—“

“If they help us with whatever this is, I’m sure it will be a step in the right direction,” Tony said distractedly. He had sent word to the Avengers, hadn’t he? Where were they?

As if the thought had summoned a friendly face, a bright orange circle of sparks began to burn in the middle of the Square, giving the soldiers something else to aim their weapons at. Tony was just about to complain about having to deal with Strange rather than one of the actual Avengers when Bruce fell out of the opening and landed flat on his face, the portal snapping shut behind him.

Tony watched with a familiar fondness settling into his chest as Bruce quickly pulled himself to his feet and glanced around, a relieved smile breaking out across his face as he spotted them in the sea of khaki.

“Tony!”

“Bruce,” Tony exclaimed, pulling Peter the short distance through the crowd. “Thank god.”

“I’m so glad to see you,” Bruce said, “You have no idea what– what’s with the blood?”

Tony ignored Bruce’s concerned frown and glanced down to his still spattered clothes. “It’s nothing,” he said, causing Peter to huff in irritation.

Bruce narrowed his eyes for a moment for letting it go. “Okay,” he said, relaxing upon his apparent belief of Tony’s fine-ness.

“Can you tell us what’s going on?” Tony asked.
“Well,” Bruce said, shrugging almost helplessly as he gestured around at the chaos. “You know. Aliens.”

“Again,” Peter groaned. “Man, I always thought it was unrealistic in the movies when the aliens always go for New York first, but life imitates art I guess.”

“Yeah, it’s unfortunate,” Bruce agreed. “You’d think it’d push Manhattan real estate prices down, but it seems we’re not that lucky.”

Tony smiled, surprised by the relief that had coursed through him at seeing Bruce. Then again– the last time he was on Earth, the Hulk had been injured and yet was charging toward another battle. Hearing that his friend was fine was not the same as seeing it for himself.

“Aw, come on Brucie, you don’t have to worry about that,” said Tony. “Like I’d kick you out.”

When Bruce smiled this time, it didn’t quite reach all the way to his eyes, and Tony knew that it wasn’t because of what he had said. They didn’t have the time for a reunion when the city was about to endure an alien invasion for the second time in six years, they needed to stay on track or they risked being in more trouble than they could stand.

A loud cracking noise echoed down to Tony’s bones and seemed to cause the whole city to shudder, an instinctively he looked to the sky. The buildings around the square were tall and bright, but the skies were a pristine blue with the clearness of a summer afternoon and the ship was high enough that it was still easily seen.

The spaceship to the north looked like it was splintering, huge metal shards pulling away from the whole and careening down toward the ground, landing with a crash in what had to be Central Park.

“Holy shit,” said Peter.

“I guess that’s our cue,” said Bruce.

The Milano was already moving, flying low in the direction of the ensuing fight, so it was no surprise when Loki reappeared in full battle armour and with Steve by his side.

“Bruce,” said Steve, surprised. “It’s good to see you.”

“Steve.” Bruce’s eyes widened slightly, like they always did when he was caught a bit off guard. But it wasn’t just surprise– there was a flicker of something else there, something slightly more wary.

Steve didn’t seem to notice. “Loki said that the others are at the Tower?”

“Yes, they’re going to watch from there,” Bruce told them, regaining his composure somewhat. “It’s a taller building than most, so it’s a good vantage point– then Strange is going to take them all where they need to be when the time comes. Which– well, I guess that’s now.”

“Okay,” said Tony. He exchanged a glance with Loki– surely they had managed to come up with something a little more concrete?

“Did you have a strategy?” Loki asked, giving voice to the question.

“We talked to Midnight, the last of the aliens that attacked earlier,” Bruce said. “She’s been moved to the Raft now, but Natasha managed to get some information out of her.”

Loki’s lips twitched, and Tony wondered if he was remembering his own impromptu interrogation
with the master assassin.

“And?” Steve prompted. “What did she say?”

“Natasha got the impression that the attacking force wouldn’t be very strategic,” Bruce said. “Something about the army not being a real species, even less individual beings than the Chitauri were. But while they were cybernetically enhanced and had a hive mind they were still a people—Natasha said that from what she could get out of Midnight, these creatures were created to serve Thanos. They don’t have much of a mind of their own at all.”

“Outriders,” Loki said, spitting the word with malice. “They must be.”

“What are Outriders, exactly?” asked Peter, a beat before Tony managed to ask the question himself. “Sound like something out of a really bad video game.”

“Monstrosities, designed only for destruction,” Loki explained, his expression still dark. “If it is they, then Agent Romanov’s information is correct. Thanos created them as an experiment, though he preferred to use his Chitauri. I am surprised he would send them here, after the Avengers so easily defeated the Chitauri.”

“I wouldn’t call that easy,” Bruce muttered.

“Though it would not surprise me if they are high in number,” Loki continued. “Especially now, with two Infinity Stones— the Outriders do not have souls, and they are essentially copies. Thanos would not find it difficult to produce them en masse.”

Tony felt his nose wrinkle as disgust flooded his body. Loki was talking about cloning creatures purely for the purpose of being cannon fodder.

“Do not feel sympathetic, nor worry for their deaths,” Loki said. “As I said, they are not truly creatures— they are created, not born, and they have no true sense of self.”

“They’re still alive, though,” Peter said nervously.

And Tony almost agreed, because— how could Loki know? How could he know for sure that they were empty, that they were nothing but mindless beasts?

He couldn’t help but draw similarities between those descriptors and what was often used in regard to the Hulk, but he forced himself not to dwell on it. He was aware enough of the situation to know that even if the creatures were sentient, intelligent beings, he couldn’t afford to show leniency. The world was on the line.

He’d been in the weapons business long enough to know that no matter how entrenched in human emotion the experience could be, the pure nature of war is cold and inhumane. The violence and destruction is inescapable, both from the side of the cruel and the suffering, and he knew that it was something he did not want Peter stuck in the middle of— especially with the compassion toward the creatures that his expression was already revealing.

“You’re on a trip if you think you’re staying for this one,” Tony told him firmly. “Peter, you’re done. You’re going home, I’m sending you back to Aunt May.”

“You can’t do that,” Peter said, almost shocked. “I’m an Avenger too.”

“You’re too young for this,” Tony said, a heavy feeling that he wasn’t quite used to weighing him down.
“I just went to space,” Peter said indignantly.

“Exactly,” Tony said. He sent a pleading look toward Loki, hoping that this time Loki would do as he asked and not bring him along like he had the last time there had been a danger and Tony had wanted to send Peter home. But Tony should have known better than to doubt— Loki was more aware of the risks today than anyone.

Peter seemed to realise what was happening, his self-branded ‘spidey-sense’ alerting him to Loki’s approach, and he danced away in avoidance. But Loki had expected it, and flickered to the side even faster than Peter could move, catching the kid’s shoulder and sending him away without a sound.

“Thank you,” Tony said, relieved.

Loki nodded in acknowledgement. He didn’t smile, but his hand brushed against Tony’s wrist, which was just as good. Then Tony turned back to the others.

“I don’t mean to rush anyone, but—“

“We need to go,” Bruce agreed. He pulled a communicator out of his pocket for Loki – Steve still had one – and then he turned away, his expression settling into the determined mask he often wore as he prepared to turn green. “It’s all right, you guys go on ahead. I’ll get there myself.”

Steve nodded. “I’m going to talk to the officers,” he said. “And I’ll warn everyone about the Guardians.”

“Good luck,” Tony offered, and Steve rolled his eyes before jogging away as well, leaving Loki and Tony alone. “All right,” Tony sighed, not wanting to waste any more time. “Let’s see how much juice I have left in this thing.”

He stretched his arms to the side in an effort to make the transition easier, though really it was unnecessary. The nanites weaved over his skin, fitting together nicely just as they were meant to, but not as well as they always had. The Mark L armour was still damaged.

It didn’t look any better than it had back on Maw’s ship when they had faced the Guardians. The metal was scuffed and damaged almost everywhere, and while most of the weapons systems were intact, the faceplate was almost entirely gone, and Maw’s implements of torture had sliced through a few of the moving parts. The suit would still work, but it was far from operating at its full capacity.

Tony had designed the suit to be self-repairing, but everything he’d done in the fight in Washington Square Park, the fight with the Guardians, and especially the unibeam had drained the batteries to the point that the armour was focusing on keeping itself running rather than fixing what was broken.

(He still didn’t regret using the unibeam, though. It was worth it.)

He had hoped that the Space Stone would work as an additional power source just as he had once lied to the Avengers that it would, but it didn’t seem to be the case. The Stone was wired in to power only the new portal-constructing gauntlets, and unless he tapped into his own control over it – something that was flimsy at best and downright dangerous at worst – Tony couldn’t use the Stone to power the nanites back up. That was all right, though. There was more than one subject of legend currently residing in New York after all, and the Space Stone was not the only thing he could use to recharge his reactor.

Loki was watching him with an assessing gaze, a small frown creasing his brow, his lips pressed tightly together in a straight line.
“What is it?” Tony asked warily.

“You need to go back to the Tower,” Loki said as he reached for Tony’s shoulder, his hand already shining a pale green.

“What?” Tony asked, surprised into taking an automatic step back. “No.”

“You have to,” Loki replied, trying again, but Tony merely shook his head.

“I won’t,” he insisted.

“I’m not taking you into battle when you have a damaged suit,” Loki snapped. “Talk to JARVIS, get him to send you another.”

“No,” said Tony said again. “I can’t. This one is far more advanced than any of the others— and it’s not destroyed, it just—”

“Advanced weaponry will mean nothing if you don’t have anything protecting your face,” Loki broke in.

“Yeah, well, your helmet doesn’t cover your face at all,” Tony shot back, and then immediately regretted it.

Because, for starters— it wasn’t true, since Loki’s horned helmet did frame his face to protect his temples and jaw, while the curvature ensured that protection did not come at the cost his peripheral vision. And Tony knew that Loki had fought with it for centuries, that it clearly worked well for him. It was forged by the best smiths Asgard had to offer, and Tony knew it would keep Loki safe.

Loki’s dark expression also had Tony's gut twinging with guilt. Tony knew Loki had only spoken out of concern, and that he himself and only reacted because he knew that the concern was unnecessary. He didn’t like to have people worry over him, and although he’d begun to accept it from Loki, he still wasn’t entirely used to it.

He didn’t apologise, though. He knew it wouldn’t do either of them any favours.

Instead, Tony reached for Loki’s wrist, brushing his thumb over the leather lacings and the metal vambrace.

“I have a plan,” he said, grasping Loki’s wrist properly, pleading. “Trust me.”

Green eyes cleared of stubbornness even as his jaw tensed— he was obviously still uncertain, but Tony was gratified to see that Loki was going to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“I do not always trust you with your own welfare,” Loki told him, and Tony almost rolled his eyes, “but I do trust you.”

“I know,” Tony said, his voice soft.

The lines of tension in Loki’s form relaxed, and he twisted his hand so that he could grasp Tony’s properly.

“What do you need?” Loki asked.

“Okay, I need you to hear me out,” Tony said. “Remember that you just agreed to trust me.”

Loki’s brow immediately furrowed with suspicion.
“I’m going to need to you take me to Thor.”

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Surprisingly, it had taken far less time to convince Loki to bring him straight to Thor than Tony had expected, yet when they spilled out onto one of the Central Park greens the battle – and Thor – was already in full swing.

The Thunderer looked like he was having the time of his life, like there were so many enemies and only so little time. Mjölnir was a blur as it moved from one Outrider to the next, and there was lightning crashing down at intermittent intervals, killing everything it hit. The Outriders themselves were somehow both not what Tony had been expecting and yet everything he had pictured from Loki's explanation. They were grey and fleshy with wide mouths, sharp teeth, and far too many limbs, and they charged forward on all of them with no regard for their own safety, just a singleminded urge to kill.

“Tony!” Thor exclaimed as they approached, delight radiating from his very being despite the fact that his attention was very firmly on the aliens he was squishing under his weapon. “I am gladdened to see you well! Loki was worried!”

“Thor!” Tony yelled, stumbling over to the god’s side as best he could in the damaged suit and ignoring pleasantries all together. “Strike me!”

Thor took the time to smush his current adversary with Mjölnir before looking over properly, but when he did his expression was very concerned.

“No!” he exclaimed, quite clearly affronted and insulted that Tony would ask him to do such a thing. “I’m not going to do that! Not when I know that Loki only just rescued you from—“

“I need you to,” Tony tried.

“No!” Thor said again, his puppy dog expression well and truly coming out to play even as Mjölnir swept through the air and took out three Outriders in one swoop.

“Oh by the Norns,” Loki snapped, raising both his hands, sceptre and all. One spell hit Tony on the head, covering his vulnerable face with a protective sheen. The other, it seemed, appeared to be little more than a small shock, as Thor let out a yelp and then glared at his brother.

“You can’t want me to do this,” Thor complained.

“Now strike him,” Loki ordered, his tone harsher than Tony had heard him use with Thor in a while. “I’ve protected his pretty face.”

Tony sighed with relief, glad that, at least, had been sorted. Thor, however, remained unconvinced. “If I hit him, Mjölnir will surely break his—“

“Not with the hammer,” Tony yelped. That would not have ended well. “Hit me with a lightning strike.”

“With lightning?” Thor asked, frowning for a second, and Tony was about to groan when the god’s expression cleared. “Oh,” said Thor, his eyes brightening with understanding. “I see.”

Because it was Thor, Tony received absolutely no warning before electricity slammed into him, knocking him off his feet. He’d managed to close his eyes against the brightness, almost blinded for the second time in one day, but it still burned behind his eyelids as the suit was flooded with raw
power. The arc reactor hummed, and the nanotech crawled and whirred and repaired itself, pieces of unessential machinery shifting and moulding and reforming into a faceplate that slotted perfectly across the damaged section.

The Mark L felt almost brand new once again, and was buzzing with enough juice that Tony felt like he could take out the entire Outrider army by himself.

Tony turned to Loki, a smile splitting across his face as he held out his hands, his suit actually glowing with the amount of electricity radiating from within.

“Satisfied?” he asked.

Loki’s eyes skimmed over the suit, narrowing slightly.

“It’ll do,” he said. Then he was in front of Tony - there was no way he had walked, he was too fast - and then the edges of Loki’s helmet were pressed awkwardly against Tony’s forehead as their lips crashed together. It was a bit uncomfortable but Tony couldn’t bring himself to care, kissing Loki back with rushed abandon that didn’t last nearly long enough.

“Be careful,” Loki said, running his free hand roughly across Tony’s cheek.

Tony nodded, feeling a little choked. He felt like he should probably be saying something as well—he just couldn’t find the words. But then Loki was starting to shift, and—

“Hey,” Tony said, reaching out for one last touch to the side of Loki’s face. “You too.”

Loki nodded once, and then stepped away.

The green shield that Tony hadn’t even noticed Loki erect dissipated into nothing, and he shot up into the sky, too aware of his own shortcomings to risk looking back down. No doubt Loki was gone already, using his magic to dart around the battlefield like a deadly whirlwind, but Tony wasn’t willing to risk it.

He saw Steve first— the bright blue uniform, even battered as it was, was easily distinguishable amongst the dull skin of the Outriders. Tony flew down beside him, already raising his palms and firing in Steve’s direction before he landed, trusting that he would be able to raise his shield just as he always did. Their combined efforts brought down a whole row of the bastards, and they fought side by side for a moment before another wave tore them apart, and then Tony was next to Thor again. Thor smiled when he saw him but didn’t stop his swing, then Mjölnir pulled him into the sky and Tony found himself flying in the other direction.

He waved to Clint who was balanced on the side of a building and giving direction to the others while keeping the Outriders busy with some well placed arrows.

Then he spotted something that he couldn’t leave alone, and dove back down into the fray. Tony was curious, but he was also polite enough to rid the guy in the literal cat suit of a few of his attackers before introducing himself.

“Who the hell are you?” Tony asked. Okay. So maybe he didn’t introduce himself.

It wasn’t necessary though, for a low chuckle sounded from below the mask. “We have already met, Mr Stark. Though I am not surprised that you do not recognise me.”

Tony frowned. He’d never been a whizz with accents, but this one certainly tugged at the edges of his memory—
Then his eyes widened.

“No fucking way,” he breathed, absentmindedly firing at an Outrider that approached from behind T’Challa.

Because it was. It was Prince T’Challa of Wakanda, dressed up like a panther and kicking ass with skill enough that he could probably give Cap a run for his money.

“What on Earth are you—“

“I had a delivery to make,” T’Challa told him, crouching down and rolling through a kick before ducking around one of Tony’s blasts and slicing the head of another Outrider clean off. Damn, the guy could move. “Thought I would do it in person,” he finished.

“And then decided to stick around for the show?” Tony asked.

“Something like that.”

The quinjet’s engine screamed as it flew overhead, bullets peppering at the column of Outriders still streaming from their ships. Tony wondered who was flying it, but decided that it didn’t matter.

It was only when he was in the sky and shooting from above that he realised what he had said to the prince. Dear lord, Natasha had been right way back when. He did lose his cool a bit around T’Challa, but– it was the crown prince of Wakanda, for god’s sake. He shouldn’t be expected to keep a level head. That would be like— like if Peter ever met Mark Hamill, or something. The guy was probably the kid’s hero, there’d be no way Pete’d keep his cool in that situation.

His smugness at the thought was replaced by rage when an Outrider managed to get a swipe in, and Tony responded by blowing up it and three of its friends with a missile.

Wilson was in the air too, flipping and twirling and taking out fifteen mooks a second with the guns he held in each hand. He was tag teaming with Rhodey, Tony noticed, the two of them using manoeuvres reminiscent of the Air Force as they danced through the sky like a pair of starlings– if starlings were equipped with heavy weaponry, that is.

Tony thought he saw Maximoff a few times, but the kid was blur. He knew he saw Thor again, the lightning was hard to miss, and he heard Hulk from a mile away. The Avengers were out in fucking force, and Thanos was not going to know what hit him.

The military was on fine form too– they had a few jets in the air assisting both the Quinjet and the Milano in thinning out the numbers, and their ground troops, JARVIS said, were tightening the perimeter around the park.

They were coordinated, they were ready, they had the upper hand. This wasn’t going to be like the first Battle of New York. This wasn’t going to be the mess it had been with the Chitauri flying all over the place like locusts.

For starters, the Outriders were all on foot, and while the bastards were fast and fucking strong, Loki had been right in labelling them as unintelligent. Clearly, they were intended to overwhelm with their viciousness, their complete absence of fear, and the sheer number of the fuckers. Tony didn’t get how they ever managed to overrun any other planet– all you needed was some weaponised air support and you could wipe the floor with the earth-bound bastards. And yeah, okay, Loki had said that Thanos preferred to use the Chitauri, usually. And no other planet had the Avengers to take them all out, but— surely some other places had tried to use planes.
It didn’t make a whole lot of sense.

Then, he saw one jump.

It couldn’t jump as high as the Hulk, but it leapt with the vertical determination of a squirrel attacking a bird feeder, landing on a jet and ripping away at the fuselage. JARVIS connected Tony to the pilot’s line without needing to be asked, and while the pilot was relaying his situation to his command in the manner his training no doubt dictated, there was an edge of panic in his voice.

“Hey, hey,” Tony broke in. “It’s all right, stay calm.”

The pilot’s relieved exhale was clearly audible.

Tony was already on his way over but Rhodey got there first, tearing at the cockpit with his bare hands. So Tony fired at the Outrider instead, knocking it back to the ground. It was hard to tell, as the entire park was writhing with fleshy grey bodies, but Tony was fairly certain that the Outrider was dead.

Rhodey took the pilot away and Tony shoved the plane in the direction of a swarm of Outriders opposed only by a couple of orange glows. The sorcerer would get out with a portal, and it was the best target for the damaged plane that Tony had.

“Watch it,” Strange snapped at him after the explosion, annoyed— but also alive, so. It was fine.

“Did you see that, Widow?” Tony asked as he flew away from the scene, repressing the urge to ask who had given Strange one of their comms again. “Watch your belly.”

“I saw it, I’ll keep an eye out,” Natasha said, confirming Tony’s hunch that she was the one piloting the quinjet.

He didn’t have a direct line to the Milano, but he hoped that whoever was piloting that – Rocket, probably, since he could see Quill happily firing at the Outriders not far from Thor – had also seen the jump and would manoeuvre accordingly.

Tony paused as he flew past two familiar figures. Mantis was an absolute sight to be beheld. She danced around Drax, poking aliens wherever she could reach, keeping up a verbal stream of – “Sleep, sleep, go to sleep, sleep, it’s sleep time, sleep, sleep—“

Drax was watching her work with a booming laugh, a long knife in each hand that he was using to cut at any Outrider Mantis failed to reach.

Maximoff slowed to give Mantis a high five as he ran past, and then promptly fell over.

“Oh no!” Mantis exclaimed, poking at his forehead. “Wake up!”

—and then Maximoff was off like the Energizer Bunny, and Mantis, after giving a still laughing Drax a truly withering glare, continued her work.

Tony was just moving on, pairing up in the air with Rhodey when the tide began to shift once again. His first indication was—

“Tasha!” Clint screeched, and Tony was sure JARVIS had been forced to lower the volume.

“I’m all right, I just can’t shake them,” Natasha said, her voice unnervingly calm. “I’m going to need some help, boys.”
This time, though, Tony was too far way, and he knew it. Rhodey was by his side, and Sam was—Tony didn’t know, actually, but he was nowhere near the quinjet—

“We’ve got it,” said Thor.

Tony shot the Outrider in front of him before turning in disbelief to look up to the quinjet, not quite sure what he was expecting to see—

But it certainly hadn’t been Thor leaping into the air, Mjölnir coming down with an ear-shattering blast, a blot of lightning slamming into the quinjet and igniting the fuel. The whole thing went up in flames and fell out of the sky, taking all of its passengers – Outrider or not – with it.

Clint’s wail shook Tony to his bones, but it cut off as soon as Natasha said—

“I’m fine. Loki got me out.”

“Good aim, Thor,” Loki said causally. “It’s going to land on one of their ships.”

Tony glanced around and noted that Loki was right.

The ensuing explosion sure was pretty, and it took out a hell of a lot of Outriders with it. He was kicking himself for not thinking of that with the plane– and it seemed that he wasn’t the only one.

Somehow, Tony wasn’t surprised when the Milano went careening into another of the ships a few minutes later, Rocket flying out at the last moment with a jet pack and evil cackle.

“Quill’s going to kill you for that, you know,” Tony said, diving in and pulling the racoon from the blast radius just in the nick of time.

“Eh, I left the shields up, the damage will be minimal,” Rocket said, cocking the giant ass gun he’d managed to save. “Now, if you’re going to be my transport, make yourself actually useful and get me closer, will you?”

Tony did fly low enough for Rocket to shoot as they skimmed across the fight, letting JARVIS also fire a few repulsor blasts, but he decided that he should be allowed a little bit of assholery after saving Rocket’s life.

“My ship, Rocket,” Quill whined the moment Tony dropped the racoon beside his teammate. “What the hell!”

Rocket merely shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he said.

Tony stayed with them for a few moments, noting that they were likely to be a little distracted, but it seemed that keeping up a tirade of sass while shooting at bad guys was a skill they had down to the nines. Then—

“Wow,” said Rocket, looking up in awe, and Tony turned to see what he was staring at with such a love-struck expression.

Then he swallowed hard.

Oh, god. As if he didn’t already have enough to deal with today.

“Hey, guy with the shiny hair,” Rocket called out, causing Bucky Barnes to look over with a quirked eyebrow, the Winter Soldier not even pausing in his assault with the machine gun in his hand. “How much for the arm?”
Barnes frowned. “It’s not for sale,” he said.

“No seriously—” Rocket tried, but Tony didn’t get to hear the rest of it— he was swept up by the tide of the battle, firing and twisting and fighting.

He found himself back to back with Loki for a few moments, holding them off while the mage worked some spell to take out another of the ships that was still spewing Outriders like a fucking plague—

Then Thor exploded in and took over while Tony flew up and shot along the ground beside Rhodey, their repulsors taking out everything in their path—

Groot fought like a bloody demon, screaming and yelling and impaling aliens left and right—

Natasha was on the ground now, and she had found herself at Mantis’ side. It seemed that the empath had become separated from Drax, and when Tony flew by— well, Mantis and Natasha worked together like a fucking dream, with Natasha cutting and slicing and shooting and Mantis sending groggy and unconscious aliens her way.

He saw Hulk throw a still laughing Drax at a bunch of Outriders like he was a cannonball, while Thor flew in from the side to join them with a blast of lightning—

Then Tony was with Cap, fighting side by side like they always had, their rhythm feeling natural and almost relaxed.

An explosion rocked the ground, and Tony grinned, knowing it was Loki, and thanking him for the distraction it caused that allowed him to get the better of the Outriders about to jump Steve from behind.

Steve called a warning and threw his shield, attacking something that Tony couldn’t see, and he looked to Steve in thanks. But Steve was distracted, still staring behind Tony in shock and actually fumbling as he caught his shield.

“Bucky?” Steve gasped, stepping forward with wide eyes.

“Hey, Steve,” said Barnes, and then Steve was hugging the guy and lucky Tony was there, really, because if he hadn’t taken out the six Outriders that he did then the pair would have been torn to shreds—

Then he was soaring above T’Challa and Strange, whose fighting styles really shouldn’t have worked together but the combination of sparking orange magic and flashing silver claws was honestly a sight to see—

Loki was fighting in tandem with Sam, both of them using their respective speed to confuse every Outrider that tried to attack them. There was a vicious snarl on Loki’s face, somewhere halfway between sadistic and joyous, and he moved with lethal grace, the sceptre cutting through air and flesh like an extension of his body. He flashed in and out of existence, not giving the monsters even the smallest chance of catching him unawares, while Sam twirled around him and kept the numbers low from above.

Tony fired off a heap of missiles to help out Hulk— the poor guy had aliens jumping on him faster than he could tear them off. Hulk roared his thanks and happily continued smashing while Tony landed beside him, happy to watch his back for a while—

“Iron Man!” Clint shouted, “Back up needed on 65th!”
And Tony was off again. The squadron on 65th had been doing a good job, but their situation was steadily growing worse.

65th street had been a clever place to hold as the southern perimeter, Tony thought. It ran several yards below the level of the surrounding park, so the road was lined with sheer walls. Of course, Tony knew now that the Outriders were capable of jumping it, though it seemed that they hadn’t bothered— they had run straight into the dip created by the road and had been easy pickings for the military on the other side.

But, like that creepy (or ingenious) scene in Spartacus, it seemed that the army had been all too effective in their strategy, and the road was now so full of the dead that the Outriders simply had to run across their fallen comrades to reach the other side.

The soldiers were beginning to buckle under the pressure.

Tony did his best to clear a gap along the front line before landing beside one of the tanks that had previously trained its weaponry on the Milano, spotting Lieutenant Colonel Bronson.

“What else can I do?” Tony asked her.

“We just need to keep the numbers down,” Bronson told him, not pausing from her direction of the machine gunners at her side. “They’re threatening to overrun us.”

“A few got through already,” one of the gunners grunted.

Tony was back in the air immediately, shooting south and hoping like hell that the Outriders hadn’t already made it to the streets— or the zoo, for that matter.

“On the left, Sir,” JARVIS said, and Tony darted straight down to where the sensors indicated four Outriders running through a wooded area. Then Tony spotted an all too familiar face peeking around from around a tree, using it as cover while she took shots at the Outriders with her handgun.

“Agent Hill?” Tony gaped.

“Don’t look so surprised, everyone was called in on this,” Hill called. “Now are you here to stand around and look pretty, or—”

Tony raised both hands and activated his newly designed weapons system.

Parts of the armour pulled from the plating on the back, specialised jets allowing them to hover at his sides. As he charged up his repulsors the detached weapons whirred with equal power, and then Tony fired—

All four Outriders fell to the ground, all of them looking very, very dead.

 Turning to Hill, Tony flashed a grin despite knowing that she couldn’t see it. “Aw,” he said. “You think I’m pretty.”

Hill rolled her eyes at him and left her cover, lowering her weapon. When Tony wordlessly opened his arms, she looked annoyed but stepped forward nonetheless. He took a firm hold around her waist and took off, taking her back over to Bronson in a matter of moments.

“The breach is taken care of,” Hill said as they landed.

“They’re thinning out,” Bronson noted. “But not enough.”
“A few of the dropships have been taken down,” Tony told them. “They seemed to have a near endless supply of the alien bastards, but Widow, Thor, Loki, and one of the Guardians have destroyed some of them. There can only be a few left now. We’re working on it.”

“The perimeter’s about to be breached on the east side,” Hill said suddenly, her hand at her earpiece. Tony swore.

“You’re needed here,” Bronson said quickly, gesturing to where the gunners were still struggling to keep the incoming Outriders at bay. “Can you send War Machine?”

Even as Tony watched another monster crashed through the line of soldiers to the sound of cracking bones and pained screams, and before he’d even thought about it Tony was over there, his lasers cutting through the grey flesh with ease but far too late to save the lives of the soldiers who had already been torn to shreds by the Outrider’s claws.

The sight of the pooling blood as it soaked into the ground around the fallen soldiers’ comrades, the pained determination in eyes that couldn’t even glance down, focused as they were on keeping the rest of the Outriders at bay— all of it had Tony frozen on the spot.

So much loss— and for what? Thanos wanted to kill off half the population of the universe? Did Thanos not understand that population growth was— it was fucking exponential, killing off half of everything wasn’t sustainable, not to mention how cold and unfeeling Thanos must be to even consider it. It was pure, unadulterated evil, and it was—

It was a waste.

“Stark.”

Tony looked up to see Hill standing beside him once more.

“Come on,” she said, her eyes worried despite the harshness of her expression. “It's not over yet.”

Tony nodded, recognising that he was being stupid. He needed to keep moving, everyone needed him in about fifteen different places at once. And while it wasn’t over yet, it had to be getting close. Bronson was right, they really were starting to thin, and the Avengers were still fighting.

He took a fortifying breath, steadying himself before giving Hill a thankful nod and forcing his mind back into the game.

But his movement was halted as a single word echoed through the air out of nowhere, two syllables sent flowing over the whole Park, heard with perfect clarity undeterred by the din of the battle.

“Humans.”

Despite the smooth, almost curious tone, the word came across like an insult, as if it had been turned over on the tongue with a long ‘u’ and a hiss as it pushed past disapproving lips. Tony had never heard the voice before in person, but he didn’t need to hear the explanations and curses that immediately began to rattle through the comms from the people who had, didn’t need for it to have echoed across his nightmares and haunted his waking moments.

Even without any of that prompting, Tony would have known exactly to whom the voice belonged.

And he wasn’t fucking ready for it.


Nobody wins for long

Chapter Summary

“I had to work to hear words fall from your silver tongue last time, little god,” Thanos said, his voice slipping almost into a croon. “Surely you will not make me work so hard again?”

Chapter Notes

WARNING:
This chapter is literally the reason why I chose not to mark this fic as 'No Archive Warnings Apply.' If you think you want a heads up, look at the notes at the bottom.

If you're feeling brave and you don't want the spoiler, carry on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The remnants of the last hissed syllable seemed to ring in Tony’s ears as he shot up into the air, hardly sparing Hill and Bronson a glance as he tried to get a better idea of what was going on. Deep and sibilant, it was the sort of voice that sounded smooth and reasonable yet sent shivers down your spine all the same. It was the sort of voice that haunted nightmares and left even the bravest of men searching for the best possible escape route, and it was echoing through the park with no possible way of determining where it was coming from.

“I don’t see him,” said Clint, his voice strained with audible tension. “The Outriders haven’t stopped, they aren’t organising further, they’re just… still going.”

“I don’t see him either, and I’m high enough that I should be able to,” said Wilson. “He’s big and purple right?”

“He should stand out,” Thor agreed. “He is using trickery.”

“So… pitiful,” the voice continued, causing all the soldiers to look around in fear. The Outriders took advantage of it and began to press forward, and Tony saw Lieutenant Colonel Bronson try to redirect her troops, but the scare tactics seemed to be having one hell of an effect. “You think yourselves so strong, so… advanced. But you’re nothing more than pieces in a game, scratching in the dirt in an attempt influence something so much greater than yourselves. It’s a shame, really. So much potential… but you do not understand what you have unleashed.”

Tony wasn’t– he wasn’t panicking, not on the battlefield, not with adrenaline and the high of the fight streaming through his veins. But it was unnerving, because Thanos sounded like he was everywhere at once, and how were they supposed to fight something that they could not see?

“It’s not trickery. He’s using the Reality Stone,” Loki said, his clear tone breaking through any
chatter on the comms and cutting sharply into Tony’s common sense.

“Stay strong, my friends,” said Thor. “The human army has the Outriders. Thanos is only one– we are many. We can beat this– unlike when I fought with Asgard, we have the advantage.”

“Thor’s right,” said Steve. “We need to stand together on this. The military can hold the perimeter, Thanos is only coming in now because he knows his army can’t stand on its own.”

“He’s arrogant enough to face us alone,” Loki agreed. Tony couldn’t help but fly high enough to try and spot him– he saw a flash of green to the west, and smiled as he saw that Loki was single-handedly taking on a flurry of at least four of the things, his sceptre wheeling with deadly precision, yet there was hardly a hint of exertion in his voice.

Tony agreed with what Loki and Steve were saying– he knew that the Outriders had become the smaller threat, but he couldn’t help but feel uneasy leaving the military to deal with them after what he had seen on 65th Street. And despite the fact that the humans and the Avengers had been able to push back to the point that they were winning, they had lost a lot of their resources in the process. The quinjet and the Milano were both down, as were all the planes the military had sent in. Rhodey, Sam, Thor, and Tony himself remained the only air power they had, and if they all focused on Thanos, then the military would lose their advantage.

Absently, he heard Steve begin to address the problem over the comms, suggesting that Clint remain in place and that Wilson, Romanov, Barnes, and himself remain with the army while the rest focused on Thanos.

Somehow, Tony doubted that plan would work.

Tony had known about Thanos for a long time, now. Loki was never keen to talk about the guy, and while Tony would never call himself a psychologist he’d read enough bloody textbooks to understand that Thanos didn’t like to do the heavy lifting by himself. He was a chess master– he enjoyed being behind the scenes. Hell, this was his third attack on Earth, yet it was the first time he had even come close to showing his face. This would also be the first time that Tony truly came into contact with the Mad Titan, yet despite his lack of experience he was sure that Thanos did not enjoy violence. He had his agenda – to destroy half the universe, if Drax and the elusive Gamora were to be believed – but as misguided as that was, its motivation lay in a desire to do something for the good of the masses. If Thanos wasn’t lying, then he wasn’t truly evil for evil’s sake.

Somehow, though, that just made it worse.

But it also meant that Thanos preferred not to intervene unless he felt like he had to, which inadvertently meant that he knew could win. Loki believed that Thanos considered himself all powerful, and with two Infinity Stones on his side it was not difficult to see why. Yet even now, even as he announced his own presence, Thanos was still staying out of the spotlight, still hanging back and hoping that the Outriders and his scare tactics would do all of the work.

Well. Two could play at that game.

Tony flew to the middle of the field where the fighting had been thickest, but that had become quiet as the flow of monsters from the dropships had slowed and conflict had moved closer to the perimeter. He hovered lower than he would have dared had the Outriders still been swarming the area, his repulsors holding him steady as he scoured the park for the Mad Titan.

“Show yourself, Thanos,” Tony said, his voice projected through the speaker in the suit to flood out just as Thanos’ had. It wasn’t as creepy (at least, Tony hoped that it wasn’t, considering that it was
his voice), but he did think that it would have a similar effect. When there was no response, he added— “What? You’re not afraid of a puny little human, are you?”

“Anthony?” Loki asked worriedly over the comms. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Tony asked, his voice steady. “I’m trying to see if this guy is all he’s hyped up to be. So what do you say, Thanos?” Tony demanded, spreading his arms wide as if he were inviting a challenge. “Why don’t you stop hiding like a coward and come and prove why you’re so much better than us?”

That seemed to garner some attention, and Tony’s eyes widened as he noticed what was happening below.

There was a shimmer of red in the middle of the green, the area blurring and buckling like a glitch in the fabric of reality. Tony blinked, the distortion making his head spin even localised as it was, and when his vision cleared Thanos was staring up at him with cocky curiosity.

The Mad Titan was everything Tony expected him to be, and yet so much more at the same time. He towered above any other figure in the park, including the Hulk— and his skin, while not as purple as it had been in Tony’s vision, was in such stark contrast to the greys of the Outriders that it almost seemed to glow. That, in conjunction with his ostentatious gold armour and heavy helm, cut a rather imposing figure that demanded all of the attention anyone had to give.

He looked up at Tony with hard eyes that burned with something like amusement, though it seemed far too dark to be anything so simple. It was an acceptance of Tony’s challenge, and he knew what he was expected to do next.

It was the last thing Tony wanted to do, of course, but the smirk that pulled at the corners of Thanos’ mouth spoke of untold horrors and—

There was far too much that Tony cared about in this park. He couldn’t stand back and risk Thanos releasing his wrath upon everyone else.

He’d made his bed, and he didn’t have a choice.

Tony landed heavily in front of the Mad Titan, his knees bending to cushion the fall while his hands remained outstretched, both for balance and to be ready for the inevitable attack. But Thanos remained relaxed, his expression open and strangely lacking in hostility as he watched Tony straighten.

“So,” said Tony, keeping his weapons trained on the creature before him despite his casual words. “You’re the guy that all this fuss is about.”

“I could say the same of you, Stark,” said Thanos, and the way he rolled his shoulders with a condescending shrug was really fucking annoying— but that was nothing compared to what his words had revealed.

“You know me?” Tony asked, his eyes narrowing as he felt a shock of cold run down his spine.

“I do,” Thanos replied, sounding almost friendly. “You’re not the only one cursed with knowledge.”

Tony couldn’t help but pause.

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?
Tony hoped— he really, fervently hoped that Thanos hadn’t had some kind of vision or heard some kind of prophecy that put a target on his head. He really didn’t want to have to deal with that crap.

Asking for an explanation did not seem like a good idea, and Tony almost sagged with relief when Loki appeared, his body primed in a half-crouch and his sceptre held at the ready.

Almost. Because the feeling was overwhelmed by the image of Loki standing in Thanos’ line of fire—something that he had hoped he wouldn’t ever have to witness coming to pass, despite the fact that he had known, really, that it was inevitable.

If there was an ounce of tension in Loki’s predatory pose, he did an impeccable job of hiding it. It was clear that he had positioned himself with care— he was closer to Thanos than Tony was, but enough to the side so it wasn’t obvious that he aimed to protect. Evidently, Loki was attempting to keep Thanos ignorant of their connection— which, despite the fact that its necessity left a dark and unpleasant feeling in Tony’s gut, was no doubt an intelligent course of action.

Usually, when Loki appeared on the battlefield swathed in magic and with intent to kill, he was intimidating to the extreme. But Thanos just chuckled, his eyes brightening with amusement as he looked at them.

“Loki of Asgard,” he greeted. “My, it has been a long time.”

Tony waited for the witty response, but nothing was forthcoming. Instead, Loki merely held still, his green eyes watching sharply and tracking Thanos’ every movement. Tony’s fingers twitched with anticipation as he watched the standoff, debating whether he should do something that would draw Thanos’ attention and give Loki an opening– but he trusted the trickster enough to hold fast.

The Mad Titan remained unperturbed.

“I had to work to hear words fall from your silver tongue last time, little god,” Thanos said, his voice slipping almost into a croon. “Surely you will not make me work so hard again?”

Loki flinched, his whole body jerking violently with such conspicuity that Thanos’ smirk grew. For a moment, Tony felt the hit like he had taken it himself. He had known what Thanos had done to Loki in the past – perhaps not personally, but even through a proxy the blame for torture always left its mark – and the level of composure that Loki had managed to hold so far was downright dauntless.

But the feeling really did last only a moment, because the flicker at the edges of that flinch had been revealing in more ways than one.

Thanos, though, hadn’t appeared to notice.

“You have something of mine;” Thanos said, his gaze sliding to Loki’s sceptre.

Loki’s grip visibly – obviously – tightened, yet still he made no move to attack. Tony flexed his own fingers, one foot sliding backward, ready to charge at a moment’s notice.

“Hand it over,” Thanos said calmly, extending his free hand, “and I will let you go.”

Again, the figure in front of Tony remained still, but there must have been a flash of something in his expression, for Thanos’ smirk widened into an accomplished grin.

“You see, I know how you think. I know how you work,” Thanos said, his free hand spreading slightly by his side as he took a step forward. “I know you, little god. And I know that you will do anything to save your own skin. You’re only here because you know how I respond to betrayal— and
you did betray me. But hand me the Stone now, and all of that will go away.”

For a moment, it looked like Loki was going to do it. He glanced down to the sceptre in his hands, his shoulders hunching in on himself. All the muscles in Tony’s body tensed, though there was nothing more that he could do. He was ready.

When Loki finally spoke, his voice was low and lethal—

—and the lips of the figure by Tony did not move.

“I think you’ll find that you don’t know me quite so well as you believe.”

Thanos snarled and turned to face the trickster that had appeared behind him, but not before Loki managed to get a swipe in at Thanos’ face, drawing a speck of blood just above his temple.

The illusion standing by Tony flickered out of existence as Tony charged forward, leaping from the ground and firing at the giant purple head. He dodged Thanos’ first hit and whirled around in a loop —

But then something caught his ankle and dragged him to a stop.

Loki lashed out in an attempt to free Tony but Thanos’ free hand stopped the attack by gripping Loki’s upper arm and lifting him into the air as well.

With Tony’s leg in his left hand and Loki’s arm in his right, Thanos threw them both to the ground with enough force to rattle Tony’s skull inside his helmet.

Allowing himself a quick glance to the side, Tony saw that Loki’s arm was jutting at an odd angle, his shoulder clearly dislocated from having been swung about like a rag doll. Tony’s armour had protected him— Loki’s had not.

“Fine,” Thanos drawled, standing over them both with a glare. “Then I suppose I will just have to take it from you myself.”

Loki responded with a snarl, using his sceptre to lever himself off the ground and landing on both feet.

“Loki, wait,” Tony said, reaching out. “You need to—“

“I am fine,” Loki snapped, touching his shoulder with his left hand glowing green. It snapped back into place with a sickening *pop*, and then, in almost the same movement, Loki brought the sceptre up with his now healed arm and shot a blast of magic at Thanos before darting around to the Titan’s other side.

Thanos sent the blast away with a shield of purple and spun to meet Loki’s sceptre with his gauntleted fist.

Tony took the opportunity presented by Thanos’ turned back to mount his own attack, but his lasers didn’t even damage the Titan’s armour, and he was forced to avoid a punch aimed at his head. He paused in the air for a moment, watching as Loki held his own. Tony knew from experience just how much such an injury could hurt even after it had been healed, yet Loki fought like the dislocation had never happened. He spun and sliced and stabbed with grace— but then Thanos caught his side and Loki went flying, and Tony knew he didn’t have the time to simply stand and gape.

With Loki on the ground Tony flew in with rage burning in his chest and every ounce of power Thor had given him blazing from his palms. If Loki needed his help, then Tony was damn well going to
On that note— where the hell were the rest of the team?

“Guys, we’re– need a– help,” Tony said frantically, his words mashed and mangled as he forced his suit beyond every limit it had. His new weapons systems slid away from his back and circled around Thanos, but even as they fired they turned into nothing but rubbery goo and fell to the ground—victims, no doubt, of the Reality Stone.

The shortened beam still hit its mark but Thanos merely shrugged it off, acting like Tony had hit him with nothing more than a goddamn water gun before using another blast from the Power Stone. It missed but Tony was sent careening off course in his attempt to avoid it. He would have ploughed into the trees and probably broken a few bones but he was caught in a web of green magic, which slowed his flight enough for him to redirect his velocity to swing back around and hit Thanos head on. But the Mad Titan was ready— while Tony had been regaining control Loki had been caught under a tree that was burning with purple fire, probably having been caught off guard while he was busy protecting Tony.

Tony’s instincts were screaming at him to help Loki free himself, but intellectually he knew that would do no good, and instead he flew at Thanos with everything he had. Maybe his repulsors weren’t going to make a difference, but he refused to believe that he could be beaten by this ugly ass raisin. If he fought hard enough, if he was clever enough, then surely—

“I’ve got you, Tones.”

War Machine had always been heavier than Iron Man, and slower, but it rocketed forward as Rhodey pushed the repulsors to their limits, screaming through the air and coming to a halt only as he fired his biggest guns at Thanos. The missile turned into nothing more than a balloon which fell harmlessly to the ground, but Rhodey appeared to have been expecting it as the repulsor that followed right behind met its mark. But Rhodey’s repulsors did no more damage than Tony’s had, and Thanos responded by raising his fist and telekinetically tearing a huge chunk out of the ground to throw in Rhodey’s direction.

Tony couldn’t see whether Rhodey got out of the way or not, for he had his weapons trained on Thanos with enough heat to cut through steel, but it only made Thanos swat at him like he was a fly.

A shout to the left caused Thanos to turn his head, and then Quill was there, his jet pack flinging him forward at dangerous speeds.


It wasn’t long before Quill’s blasters began to shoot only bubbles but then Rocket and Groot were on the case, explosions from Rocket’s guns blinding Thanos’ eyes while roots and vines caught his feet. Tony flew in close enough to get in a good hit to the side of Thanos’ head but he was thrown to the ground when he went in for a second.

Before he could get back up he saw a non-sentient tree flying his way. He raised his hands to protect his head though he knew that it was still going to hurt like a—

The tree cracked against vibranium, and Tony looked up to see Steve standing over him in a protective crouch.

“Come on, Tony,” said Steve, shooting him an encouraging smile. “This is not the time to be lying
“Sorry, old man,” Tony grunted, accepting the hand to help pull him back to his feet.

A yell to the left indicated that Drax had arrived, though the Guardian was distracted by a couple of Outriders who had yet to leave the area. Not that it mattered—Loki was holding Thanos in a web of yellow, his eyes shining brightly and his arms outstretched. Thanos looked frozen, an expression of horror crossing his face, and, well. Tony recognised the look, for he was sure it was very similar to the one he would have worn himself when he encountered Wanda Maximoff. He wondered what Loki was showing him, for clearly he was making use of the Mind Stone to overpower Thanos’ thoughts. The way that Thanos’ left hand was slightly shaking despite his glove suggested that he was trying to fight back, but Loki wasn’t about to wait for a counter attack. His sceptre was already on its way to meeting with Thanos’ throat, the sharp edge gleaming in the reflection of the Mind Stone—

But then Thanos glowed bright and a blast of purple cut through the park, pushing them all back a good few yards. Loki was caught in the thick of the explosion, and Tony launched forward to catch him before he could get injured any further. Loki pulled out of his hold almost immediately, and Tony shot back into the sky.

“Enough!” Thanos yelled, raising his gold encased hand, his fingers beginning to curl closed over his palm. Tony recognised the motion as the only thing it could be, and snapped out a warning to anyone who could hear—

“We need to stop him from closing his fist!”

But they were all too far, and even with Steve making a flying leap toward Thanos, there wasn’t going to be hope of getting there in time.

Steve was intercepted by an Outrider and was forced to defend himself, and Tony swooped around to make his own, desperate attack—

Then there was a deafening bellow and the thundering crash of heavy feet bounding forward as the Hulk raced for blood, his words vanishing in a rumble of pure rage. Thanos didn’t waste any time, almost raising an eyebrow with condescension as he turned his Gauntlet in the direction of the green berserker—

But his change in focus meant that he didn’t see the portal open behind him, nor did he see Sam before he had Falcon-kicked him in the side of the head. One of Strange’s portals also took Sam to safety, and Hulk used the distraction to lay a sharp blow on Thanos’ shoulder. Tony saw an opening and blasted him from the left while Rhodey ducked down to do the same on the right, and then Maximoff was there out of nowhere, tucking what looked to be a grenade into Thanos’ armour before dashing away.

The blast did little more than knock Thanos down and begin to anger him, but before he could recover Hulk was back in the fray, backed up by both Tony and Rhodey.

Thanos threw a chunk of rock and Tony had to duck away, and when next he looked Prince T’Challa was there, cutting at Thanos’ Achilles with vibranium claws. Thanos fell to one knee, his lips twisting into a snarl now, the arrogance slipping away—

The red cape flew in from nowhere, and for a moment Tony thought maybe it was Thor— but there was a flash of lightning several hundred metres away, and the cape wasn’t attached to an actual person. It wrapped tightly around Thanos’ hand, stopping him from closing his fist and using the
Infinity Stones.

Quill fell from another portal and got in a few pot shots before being whisked away, Thanos’ distraction clearly having been enough to put his weapon back in commission. Natasha dropped from another portal, managing to zap him with her bites before Strange took her back out of the line of fire, too.

Lightning cracked down from the sky as Thor finally made an appearance, sweeping at the Titan with Mjölnir.

Thanos used the Reality Stone to throw Thor to the side and then caught an arrow from the left only to be hit with a repulsor blast from the right. Then the arrow in his hand exploded and distracted him long enough for Hulk to punch him in the gut, which caused him to turn in time to catch Steve’s shield with a crack to his jaw.

Thanos yelled and flooded the park with a red wave, and the ground started to bubble and shift and —

“The floor is lava!” T’Challa warned them all as he danced backwards, the others all scrambling to do the same. “It is honestly—“

“Not for long,” Loki snarled, his eyes glowing yellow with the power of the Mind Stone while his hand shone green with his own seiðr. He waited until Thanos was once again distracted by Sam and Rhodey before crouching down. Tony stood over him protectively while he pressed his palm to the ground and calmed the surging red-hot dirt, solidifying it so that the rest could once again charge forward.

Thanos was tiring—

They were closing in—

Another portal opened above Thanos and Mantis dropped out of it, clearly aiming to perch upon his shoulders and put him to sleep. It had been a good idea, but the portals had already been overused and Thanos, it seemed, had learned his lesson. He stepped to the side at the first tell tale hiss of sparks and caught Mantis by the neck, throwing her across the field in a single manoeuvre. Drax shouted in rage but was knocked to the side with equal ease. There was a flash of purple and the cloak of levitation went flying as Thanos snarled, and Tony braced himself for the explosion from the Power Stone that was sure to follow.

But Hulk flew forward with a bounding leap, his fists raised in the air.

As Thanos turned to meet him Loki raised his sceptre once more, his teeth gritting tightly together as he used the gifts the Stone afforded him to recapture Thanos’ mind.

Once again caught in in the power of the Mind Stone, Thanos looked to the sky and moaned, his arms falling to his side.

Hulk yelled in triumph and knocked Thanos to the ground. Then he grabbed Thanos by the left hand and pulled—

Tony froze.

He had seen plenty of terrifying things in his life, but nothing could top the sight of Hulk roaring in the middle of a battlefield, the Infinity Gauntlet raised high above his head.
“Oh shit,” said Clint, his voice coming in loud and clear over the comms.

Natasha was the only one brave enough to approach, stalking forward like a cat while the caution in her steps was clear even from a distance.

“Hey, big guy,” she said, not even the slightest hint of a tremor in her voice. “Why don’t you hand that over?”

For a single, nail-biting moment, Tony thought Hulk might actually do it.

But, of course—

“Hulk smash!” Hulk roared, and Natasha dove clear as Hulk brought the golden artefact to the ground in one mighty swing.

The Gauntlet didn’t break, but that only served to make Hulk angrier. He smashed and smashed, and when the Gauntlet remained intact – dented, yes, but probably still useable – Hulk let out one more bloodcurdling snarl before raising the glove above his head once more and tearing it to pieces. The golden fragments and the two Infinity Stones scattered across the ground, and Hulk shouted his victory to the sky.

“Whoa,” said Peter, landing to Tony’s left. “Go Hulk.”

“You said it, kid,” Tony replied, his shock overruling his sense for a moment. But then it came crashing back down as he turned to face the teenager who most definitely was not supposed to be there. “Peter…” he growled.

The eyes on Peter’s mask widened. “No, no, Mr Stark, please,” Peter whined. “I only just got here! Do you know how long it takes to swing to Central Park from Queens?”

Tony was glad to see that the Iron Spider suit still appeared mostly clean, no more battered than it had been from the trip into space. He’d stayed out of trouble.

So far, anyway.

“Oh, you’re definitely going back home,” Tony snapped.

Peter shook his head and took a step backward—

And then Peter was gone in a shimmer of green, and Loki lowered the hand he had touched to Peter’s shoulder.

Loki turned to Tony and placed his hands on either side of the Iron Man helmet, and for a moment Tony had the ridiculous image of Loki kissing his faceplate. But then Loki spoke calm and firm, despite the way his pupils were blown wide with the excitement of the fight.

“JARVIS,” he said. “Make sure Peter doesn’t leave the Tower, will you?”

“It would be my pleasure, Sir,” JARVIS told him, using the suit’s speakers.

A smug smile crossed Loki’s lips.

“Hulk just destroyed the Infinity Gauntlet,” Tony said, sounding shocked even to his own ears.

“Yes,” Loki said levelly as he lowered his hands. “It would seem that Eitri did not make Thanos the most powerful weapon in the universe, after all.”
Tony was about to respond but then an Outrider that hadn’t yet run for the perimeter launched itself toward them, and Tony noticed it too late—

But a silver blur intercepted it, shoving it away toward Thor who gladly smushed it under his hammer.

“Stop flirting and get back to work!” said Maximoff, doing another loop purely to be annoying.

Tony exhaled heavily, allowing the breath to push out his cheeks before releasing it in an audible huff. But Loki’s eyes merely hardened, his sceptre shimmering magically back into his hands as he turned to look back to Thanos.

The sight was almost pitiful. With all but one of the dropships destroyed, Thanos had only the one hope for escape. The Outriders weren’t withdrawing, but if they had a brain Tony was sure that they would have been. Everything about Thanos’ posture screamed reluctant retreat, yet he wasn’t leaving – he was on his knees, his hands sifting through the grass. But his body was already half angled toward the smouldering dropships, and it was clear that moment he found what he was searching for, he would dash away to regroup. The expression cutting across his face remained a nasty snarl, but there was a hint of desperation to it that hadn’t been present at any point before. Everyone saw it, but the sight of the Mad Titan on his knees was so unexpected that Tony found he could do little more but watch.

However… Not all of their party had the same compunction.

“You shall not get away again, monster,” Thor snarled, leaping into the air and raising Mjölnir with battle cry that could probably have roused all the spirits in Valhalla. “For Asgard!”

For the first time since Tony had met him, Thor truly looked like the god the legends had reported him to be. His eyes glowed with the roar of electricity and lightning crackled all around him, dancing over his skin and burning across the sky as he flew through the air.

Thanos was scrambling now, his hands and knees in the dirt as he scrabbled at the ground, his eyes widening as he glanced up at Thor flying toward him with all the force of an avenging angel.

It was awe inspiring, to be honest, and Tony felt a feral grin tear across his lips.

Tony could picture it all playing out a fraction of a second faster than real time, because he’d seen it all before. Thor would go for the head with Mjölnir just as he always did when he was aiming to kill, and the mighty hammer would come crashing down and split skin and bone with ease. Thanos would crumple to the ground, the light would leave his eyes, and it would all be over.

This was… this could be the end.

Then Thanos snatched something from the ground and raised his hand, and in the time it took for Tony’s smile to fall away the Mad Titan’s body began to glow, began to burn with power. His skin bubbled and crackled and appeared to be charred black but Thanos wasn’t fazed, his mouth twisting into a determined sneer as he threw out his hand and directed the pure power that was eating him alive in a single, deadly blast.

No amount of lightning could have stopped it.

Thor didn’t stand a chance.

The power didn’t burn at Thor’s skin the way it had Thanos’ – it merely cut straight through him, obliterating half of his torso and leaving a horrifying wound reminiscent of when Tony used his
unibeam. Except it wasn’t in the middle of his chest, and it certainly wasn’t clean— it was an absolute mess, the devastation of it brought into sharp focus by the rapidly fading flash of lightning.

The final clap of thunder muffled the sound of Thor’s body hitting the ground, and Mjölnir slipped free of his fingers to land in the grass like the useless paperweight Tony had often jokingly claimed it to be.

Tony had seen friends fall before, but never like this, never with so little hope of fighting back and not with such a brutal reminder of just how outmatched the Avengers truly were.

Never before had he felt so fucking useless. Thor was perhaps only fifty yards away, lying broken on the ground and surrounded by the crushed bodies of his opponents, and there was absolutely nothing that Tony could do. He was frozen, staring at the ruined form of his friend with his heart in his throat. Ridiculously, hysterically, Tony couldn’t help but be relieved by the thought that at least Peter had not been there to see it.

Then, Loki screamed.

The sound tore through Tony like even Thor’s fall hadn’t managed— a horrible, broken cry that shattered anything Tony had left. He managed to hold on to just enough sense to snatch out to the right but Loki had already moved beyond his grasp. The god was stalking toward Thanos with his sceptre blazing bright, his every movement screaming with an ache for revenge.

Tony was shaking, his whole body wracked with tremors that caused his already overworked muscles to ache. He’d just seen Thanos tear Thor apart in a single gesture, and now Loki was headed straight for him. He couldn’t even think about Thor, not when Loki was glowing so bright that Tony could hardly look, his whole body swirling with green and yellow.

“Loki!” Tony cried out, leaping into the air without a single ounce of hesitation and throwing himself towards the grieving trickster.

“You’re going to die for that,” Loki snarled, his teeth snapping together with the force of his torment as he continued his advance. “I’ll kill you for that!”

And Tony was terrified, more afraid than he had ever been in his life. Not because of the sensation of pure danger that just seemed to roll from Loki in waves, but because…. Well, Tony had seen Loki lose his cool before. He’d seen Loki desperate with a need for freedom, he’d seen Loki mad with a desire for revenge, he’d seen Loki protective and defensive and enraged. But never before had he seen a loss of composure so brutally raw, so horribly broken. In that moment Tony found that he didn’t know what Loki was capable of, what Loki would be willing to risk, and that scared him down to the bone.

Thanos was on his feet, still glowing and almost appearing to shudder as he bent down to scoop a broken piece of the Infinity Gauntlet from the ground, and Tony caught the briefest flash of red amongst the gold plating as Thanos tucked it in a pocket.

His eyes were still glowing a bright and dangerous purple on black as they caught Loki’s approaching figure.

Thanos didn’t hesitate. He simply raised his hand and opened his fist, sending out another wave of destructive force to burst across the park, flying toward Loki at speeds that would be impossible to avoid. It seemed harsher than before, making Thanos’ attacks with the Infinity Gauntlet feel like child’s play—
And Loki didn’t even pause.

“Loki!” Tony shouted again, diving for his lover. There was no way they could escape the blast, no possible chance of survival. Yet Tony’s mind flew even faster than his suit, and even as he collided with Loki and protected him with his body, he delved deep into the power he had been so very hesitant to use.

He didn’t do it with a specific purpose in mind, he just knew he had to keep Loki safe—

A bright ring of blue exploded from his chest, not stopping but redirecting the purple heat so that it dissipated safely into the sky.

Tony held on to Loki like his life depended on it, his arms wrapped tightly around the mage like he was afraid that he would disappear. Loki was thrashing and fighting and snarling but Tony held fast, his suit straining against Loki’s strength. He refused to let Loki go, and when the colours faded and the dust settled, Thanos was gone.

It was only then that Tony released his hold enough for Loki to pull free, and the god stumbled upright.

“No!” Loki screeched, throwing magic out with such ferocity that the ground all around him was torn to shreds. “He can’t get away, he can’t!”

Loki threw a few more blasts, working himself into exhaustion. The sceptre slipped from Loki’s fingers and fell to the ground as his hands curled into fists, the full length of his body shaking with tremors. Tony thought about going to him, but he wasn’t sure that it would help, so he just watched while Loki calmed himself and stood tense, his back straight and trembling.

Steve was crouched over what was left of Thor only a few feet away, his expression crushed and eyes full of tears. Natasha hovered near his shoulder, her own face wiped clean of all emotion, while the others all stood in an awkward ring. But Loki refused to so much as turn in that direction, his eyes staring sightlessly at the burning wrecks of the remaining dropships.

Tony didn’t know what to do. Loki was—Loki needed him, but Tony didn’t move, simply standing there like he was just as broken. Absently, he recognised the feeling as shock— with Thanos gone the adrenaline in his veins had petered out, and he was left with only exhaustion and a delayed response to pure and unadulterated terror.

He knew that he was probably shaking as well, and he could feel the metal of his suit slipping against his skin but it felt unnaturally hot, and his breathing was definitely far too fast. He was aware of JARVIS speaking soothingly in his ear, and Tony had just enough conscious thought to fold his helmet away into the suit, needing the fresh air and the reprieve from JARVIS’ sympathy but keeping on the rest of it, fully aware that he would likely fall to his knees without its support.

Tony felt more than saw someone move closer, unable to tear his eyes from Loki’s tense form. It was only when he heard the voice that Tony even realised who it was.

“I think…” started Strange, his words slow and uncharacteristically soft. “No, I… I know that I can help.”

Finally, Tony looked over. And as he stepped toward the broken body of their friend, Strange’s hand curled tightly around the amulet hanging from his neck.
This chapter describes the temporary death of a major character. (It's not Tony or Loki, though.)
(...It's not Thanos, either.)
“You could bring him back?” Steve asked, shocked. “But that— surely that goes against the laws of nature?”

“Yes,” said Strange, raising a brow. “What ever did you think that the Infinity Stones were for?”

The weight of the arc reactor felt unnaturally warm and heavy against his chest, the soft whirr escalating into a shattering buzz in his ears. The energy that ran through the reactor was only there because of Thor. Tony would have burned out, he never would have had the power to make it through the whole fight without that life-giving electricity.

And now, Thor was gone. Thor was—

Tony was never going to be able to hear that booming laugh again, was never going to be able to see the joy in his eyes when he encountered a new flavoured Pop-Tart, was never going to be comforted by bluntly soothing words and a caring smile that no one else ever managed quite the same.

He hadn’t known Thor all that well. They had fought side by side for years, but it was just now, when faced with the prospect of never seeing him again that Tony realised— he didn’t know Thor’s favourite colour. He didn’t know what Thor’s favourite horse was called, or where Thor liked to hide as a kid when Loki’s pranks had upset him. To Tony, Thor had always just been Loki’s brother, and that title had come hand in hand with a mixed bag of emotions that more often than not led to them clashing. Tony had even planned to have a serious conversation with Thor after the battle about what had happened on Asgard, but now he would never have the chance.

That was the crux of it, Tony supposed. They hadn’t had a whole lot of chance. First, Tony had avoided New York for the memories it brought, hiding away in Malibu but for when the Avengers needed him. Then he’d had Loki, another reason to stay away from Thor— and then, after Ultron and the Accords and the mess with Loki’s heist on Iðunn’s garden, Thor had been in Asgard fighting against Thanos and none of the others had even known. But despite the distance, he knew that Thor had been Tony’s friend. He had stood by Tony and Loki even when others hadn’t been willing to do so. He was always one of the first to come to their defence when others tried to bring them down, and he had kept their secret about the apple from Odin— had pardoned Loki for it, even, when Thor had ascended to the throne. Thor had always been a good person, but now he was just an empty husk, lying on the ground.

Absently, Tony wondered what they would do with Mjölnir. None of them could move it, after all. Did its loyalty shift to someone else? Would they just have to leave it there? Maybe they could turn it into a nice monument to commemorate the sacrifice of the first Avenger to lose his life on the field of battle.

The first.

Tony was damn scared that Thor wasn’t going to be the last.
It was Steve who reached out to close Thor’s eyes, sliding his lids over the forever-dimmed blue with gentle, shaking fingers.

Hulk walked over from the torn up ground still scattered with pieces of gold. His brow was heavy and creased in a deep frown as he crouched on the other side of his fallen friend from Steve, poking at Thor’s thigh with a gentleness that anyone who didn’t know him would never have believed him capable of.

“Thor,” said Hulk, poking again, his frown deepening. When that had gained no response, he leaned over Thor’s head and roared, the sound loud enough that Thor’s blonde hair shifted around his face.

Tony shuddered as he recognised the move, for it was the very one that had woken him up after he had fallen from the portal above his own tower. Hulk had remembered saving Tony then, and he—

When Thor still didn’t move, Hulk roared again, and slammed his fist on the ground beside Thor’s head, sending Steve scurrying away in shock. His heart could not have been in it though, for the hit didn’t even lift the dirt. For once, Hulk didn’t look angry. He just looked sad.

“He’s not going to wake up, Hulk,” Natasha said cautiously, clearly worried about what that information might do, but following through on the desire they were all no doubt feeling to try and help Hulk deal with his pain. Hulk merely fell back on his haunches at looked across at her, his eyes wide and full of understanding.

“Thor gone?” Hulk asked slowly, clearly dreading the answer that he already knew.

Natasha nodded once.

Hulk let out a wailing roar that shook the trees, his fingers digging into his hair.

Natasha took a step back and Tony saw Loki flinch hard, his whole body jerking at the sound.

But still, Hulk was not angry— he was shrinking, in fact, the green of his skin fading and his muscles shuddering as he sized down, leaving only a shaking Bruce in the dirt. He wasn’t naked, but the stretchy pants that Tony had long since designed for this purpose hardly covered everything, and despite the fact that it was summer, the air still held a coolness to it that cut to the bone.

Maybe it wasn’t the weather at all.

Still, Tony was absently grateful when Strange’s red cloak flew to cover Bruce immediately, as he wasn’t sure that he was in the state of mind to do anything to help. Bruce smiled with gratefulness of his own, and managed to pull himself upright as the circle around Thor grew tighter.

Clint had arrived on one of the hover-bikes, his expression stonier than Tony had ever seen. The Guardians were there as well, looking on with solemn respect— even Mantis, injured and only standing with Drax’s help, had tears of sympathy and grief in her eyes. Tony could hear impressed mutterings from some of them as they watched Bruce but he found that he couldn’t concentrate on any one thing, his focus split and torn, still broken from the fast pace of the battle.

It was only when Strange moved again to stand beside Steve that Tony realised the sorcerer was still waiting for an answer.

“Let me help,” Strange said again, his fingers playing with the leather strap of his amulet.

“Strange,” Clint said, his voice hoarse and clammy. “I know you used to be a surgeon, man, but he’s— Thor’s—“
“Clint,” said Bruce, putting a hand on the archer’s shoulder. Had Tony looked *properly*, he knew he would have seen pale faces and red eyes, mouths slack with shock and backs hunched with grief. He didn’t *want* to see it— he didn’t want to see his teammates so shattered.

But Loki… Loki was standing tall, his green eyes hard and uncompromising as he stared out, still refusing to look away from the direction of the smouldering dropships. It was worrying, in a way, because Tony was afraid that Loki might be plotting to follow in that direction, that he might already be planning a solo mission.

The fear forced Tony’s feet into motion in a way that his grief had not.

“Loki,” Tony started, forcing his voice into the shape of something low and soothing as he reached out to touch Loki’s shoulder. But to Tony’s shock, Loki wheeled around with hatred in his gaze.

“This was *you*,” Loki snapped harshly. “You did this, you— you *stopped* me from stopping him—”

Loki cut himself off with a whine, his eyes flickering with pain deeper than that which his words had inflicted on Tony. “No,” Loki said. “My fault. Always my— I was distracted, I should have kept Thanos in the Mind Stone’s thrall—”

“This was *not* your fault,” Tony said harshly, knowing better than to take Loki’s words at face value. They hurt, yes, but he knew that Loki didn’t mean them. Not the first part, anyway. “You fought as well as you could. We all did.”

Loki assessed Tony for a moment, and they were close enough that Tony was able to pinpoint the exact moment that Loki chose to close himself off. The pain in his gaze shuttered and dimmed, his expression falling into a blank mask that cut Tony far deeper than the anguish had.

“Loki—” Tony tried, reaching out again, but his hands passed through nothing but air and the remnants of green seiðr. Tony’s previous worry slammed back into him with full force, and he coughed out— “JARVIS?”

“He has returned to Avengers Tower, Sir,” JARVIS said, and Tony felt his breath gush out in relief. He immediately began to fire up his repulsors, his helmet clicking back over his face as he prepared to go after his partner.

“Wait,” said Rhodey, laying a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“Get off me,” Tony spat. “I’m going, you can’t stop me.”

“I’m not going to,” Rhodey replied, his voice soft. “But don’t you think there should be some good news to tell him? If you go now, nothing changes.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, and Rhodey gestured to where Strange was standing over Thor. The others were watching avidly, clearly curious about what was about to happen.

“You all know what this is,” Strange said to them, gesturing to the amulet. “You all know what it can do.”

“Complete control,” Tony said almost absentmindedly. “Over everything and anything to do with time.”

Strange nodded. “I can reverse what happened,” he explained. “Turn back the clock, so to speak. Give Thor another lease on life.”
“You could bring him back?” Steve asked, shocked. “But that— surely that goes against the laws of nature?”

“Yes,” said Strange, raising a brow. “What ever did you think that the Infinity Stones were for?”

“I’m not so sure that this is a good idea,” said Rocket, eyeing the amulet with distaste. “We’ve seen what happens when someone plays with one of those things.”

“I’ve used it this way before,” said Strange, his gaze almost going misty. “I can’t do the same thing here— I can’t save everyone. I could reverse the whole battle but then we would have to fight it again, and to remember it we would have to remain as tired and injured as we are. I could go to each and every soldier who has fallen, but with the speed of the battle— to bring them back when I do not know the exact circumstance of how they died could result in disaster. But Thor?” Strange’s expression tightened with determination. “I saw what happened to Thor, and I can reverse it with no consequence. I can save this one.”

“I did say that I thought the Time Stone would be the most useful of these fucking things,” Tony muttered, allowing himself to step closer, taking comfort from the way that Rhodey stayed close by his side. “Though— didn’t Loki say that this was dangerous?”

“He did,” Quill helpfully inputted.

Strange looked about to reply, but he was cut off when all of their comms blared.

“Avengers?” Barnes’ voice sounded unsure, like he felt out of place talking as part of the team. “Erm— Steve, or— Guys, we need some back up. Fight’s not over yet.”

Steve’s gaze sharpened, though he still couldn’t quite pull away from his fallen comrade.

“What’s happening out there, Buck?” he asked.

“It’s—“ Barnes paused, and Tony could almost hear the frown in his voice. “Is everything all right?”

Steve looked a little lost, like he wasn’t sure how to reply. No doubt he didn’t want to worry his friend, but he didn’t want to belittle what had happened, either.

“No,” said Sam, cutting in. “It’s not, Barnes. But it will be. What do you need?”

“When everyone left to fight Thanos, the military got overrun.” Barnes’ voice was surer now, finding his footing in the familiar. “Some of the Outriders have made it into the city, and they’re tearing the place up. The area’s been evacuated, but there’s a lot of damage and we need to stop them before they get any further.”

Steve’s eyes widened, and he moved to get to his feet. But Sam stopped him, placing a calming hand on his shoulder.

“The civilians—“ Steve started, but Sam shook his head.

“They’re in no immediate danger. You stay here,” Sam said to Steve. “Guardians, you guys come with me. We’ll leave the Avengers to their own.”

Drax began to complain, but Bruce went over to help Mantis, and she nodded to her friend.

“Go,” she said. “Kill those creatures that do nothing but harm for no reason.”

Drax responded with a feral grin.
“Sam,” said Steve, looking up with grateful eyes. “You know that you’re an Avenger, too.”

“I’m still not sure if I want to deal with all the drama,” Sam replied in a soft attempt to lighten the atmosphere. Then his wings unfurled and he leapt into the sky, the Guardians who were still capable of fighting hot on his tail.

“I’m going with them,” said Natasha, straightening and dusting herself off. She climbed onto Clint’s hover-bike, and the archer joined her.

“Let us know if he gets better,” said Clint, nodding to Thor before starting up the bike. Maximoff ran with them as well, offering only a salute before he too followed after Wilson and the others.

Rhodey didn’t move, and Tony was grateful for that, too. He stayed by Tony’s side, as always. Tony knew he didn’t appreciate his friend enough. He should do something nice for Rhodey.

“Well,” said Strange, looking around at the remaining sullen expressions one last time. “Then if there are no more objections, I suppose that I had best get to work.”

Strange’s face creased with concentration as he twisted his hands in front of his chest in a complicated gesture, the amulet opening and glowing a bright green. It wasn’t the same comfortable hue of green that Tony was familiar with– it was darker in shade, yet somehow brighter and giving off an edge of tempting danger that Loki’s seiðr had never quite reached.

Then, Thor’s body began to ripple.

It was different from watching the time-lapses that Tony had made of his own healing process– because, he realised, the damage to Thor’s torso wasn’t healing. The flesh wasn’t knitting back together, his skin wasn’t flowing back over the injury– the damage was simply being reversed. The wound from the Power Stone was being pulled away from Thor’s body like the event had never even happened in the first place, the skin bubbling in a backward parody of the burn. There was a dash of blood from the instant before the burn was cauterised, then there was a small flash of purple and it was like the wound was never even there. Thor’s eyes snapped open with a spark of electricity, his mouth twisting into a snarl. There was a telling *whine* of power and then Mjölnir slammed into Thor’s raised hand, and everyone was thrown backwards as a bolt of lightning rained down from the sky.

And upon witnessing his first resurrection, the words that flowed through Tony's genius mind were as simple as they were emotionally encompassing.

*Holy fucking shit.*

“Thor!” Steve exclaimed, the first to regain his wits, though his eyes were still wide with awe. “You're alive!”

“Captain?” Thor asked, the lightning cracking about his body beginning to fade. He was on his feet already, Mjölnir ready for a fight, and he looked about them all with confusion. “Where is Thanos?”

“Thanos is gone, Point Break,” said Tony, shaking free of his own shock to take a step closer to the resurrected god, though his voice was certainly wobbling a little. “Do you not remember?”

Of course, Thor had been out for the count when Thanos had actually left, but surely he should have been able to connect the dots—

Unless—
Oh, crap. Did Thor not remember anything? Was that a symptom of coming back from the dead? Well, Tony supposed that there wasn’t really anyone they could ask, but from the confusion in Thor’s gaze as it flickered between the remaining Avengers, it would seem that he didn’t.

“Thor has been returned to the instant before Thanos struck him,” Strange said wearily, confirming Tony’s suspicions.

Thor frowned. “Before when?” he asked. His blue eyes were narrowed, and Tony knew that Thor, for all he often presented as such, was not stupid. True, Tony didn’t know him all that well, but if he knew anything, it was that Thor possessed a fierce intellect that while perhaps not matched to his brother’s, was certainly high enough to have already worked out what had occurred. Caught in a mind-set that Tony was only too familiar with, Thor was only hoping for someone to prove him wrong.

“Thor…” Steve started, pausing as the god’s burning gaze turned to match his own. “You… You died. Thanos hit you with the Power Stone, and you died. We all watched you fall.”

Thor shook his head. “No,” he denied. “I am standing right in front of you. I have not visited the halls of Valhalla, I was not greeted by the cheers of my fallen shield-brothers—“

“You died,” Steve said again, firmer this time. “Strange used the Time Stone to bring you back.”

Thor’s gaze flickered to Strange, who nodded.

“So you did find it, then,” Thor said, and Tony recognised the shock that was guiding his unrelated comment. That was— okay, because it meant that Thor was falling into mechanisms of coping. He was no doubt going to crash some time later when reality sunk in, when he realised just how close he had come to never swinging that hammer again— but before that happened, Tony had need of him.

“Thor, you need to come with me,” Tony told him. “You need to come and show Loki that you’re still alive.”

Thor’s expression fell. “Was he all right?” he asked.

“No,” Tony said. “So you need to come and—“

“No,” Thor echoed, shaking his head and taking a small step back. When Tony began to protest, Thor held up a hand and continued. “You misunderstand me, Stark. If what you say is true and I go to Loki now, he will believe me a ghost, an illusion. A trick. You must tell him first. He will trust you.”

“So come with me,” Tony argued.

“Speak to him first,” Thor replied calmly. “Please. He will not wish to see me now.”

Tony looked to the others for support, and frowned when he didn’t find any.

“Give him a moment, Tony,” said Bruce, his arm still around a drooping Mantis even as he offered Tony a soft smile. “He needs to process.”

“He—“

“Have you forgotten what he just went through?” Steve asked, cutting Tony off and stepping toward him, though his expression was open and understanding. “Tony, he may not remember it, but Thor just died. We all need a moment to process that, but no one more than him, all right? Loki doesn’t
just need Thor right now— he’s going to need you, too.”

Tony could have ignored Steve. Maybe. But he couldn’t ever just brush away his oldest friend.

“Just go to him, Tony,” said Rhodey, offering a weak smile as he lay one of his dark grey gauntlets on Tony’s scarlet clad shoulder. “They’re right, Thor needs his own moment, but you know that Loki’s hurting right now. You can help him, so just go.”

Always the voice of reason.

“Thanks, platypus,” Tony sighed, and he prepared to fire up the repulsors but was stopped once again. This time, though, he didn’t mind so much.

“Here,” said Strange, already opening a portal despite his clear exhaustion. “Go. We’ll follow when things have calmed down.”

—•—

When Tony fell out of the portal and landed on the soft rug of his own living room, he was met with a relieved gasp and hands tugging at his shoulder, trying to pull him upright.

“Mr Stark?” Peter’s eyes were wide and scared, his voice high-pitched with worry. “Are you okay?”

“I’m— I will be,” Tony groaned, straightening his spine and letting the suit dissolve back into the arc reactor. As he did so, he caught sight of the black mug on the coffee table, resting exactly where he had left it only that morning— that morning, for all that it felt like a century ago. The sight of the mug brought a twinge to his chest that was just a few inches shy of an ache, and he looked back to Peter with a touch of desperation. “Have you seen Loki?”

The fear in Peter’s eyes increased tenfold, and Tony frowned. He didn’t think that Loki would have done anything to the kid, he really didn’t, but he also knew what Loki could look like sometimes.

“Kid?” Tony prompted worriedly.

“Yeah, he showed up about—” Peter cut himself off, swallowing hard. “About half an hour ago, maybe? I tried to talk to him, but…”

“What happened?” Tony asked, gripping his shoulder. “Peter?”

“Is he…” Peter trailed off, glancing first to the ground before looking back up to Tony with worried determination. “Is he going to be all right?”

Oh.

Honestly, Tony should have known. Peter hadn’t been afraid of Loki, he’d been afraid for him.

“Yeah, kid,” Tony said, offering him the most reassuring smile he could muster. “It might take a while, but he’s going to be fine.”

“Oh,” Peter said, deflating a little. “What happened out there, Mr Stark? Loki wouldn’t say anything.”

Tony thought for a moment, considering. “Thor got hurt pretty bad,” he said. “He’s all fixed up now, but it rattled Loki something fierce.”

“Thor?” Peter gasped. “But he’s okay now?”
“Yes,” Tony said firmly. “It was looking a little shakey there, but yes, he’s totally fine, just a bit confused about it all I think. But it’s Loki I’m worried about— did you see where he went?”

“I think he went to your room,” said Peter. “He looked like he just wanted to be alone, so I let him go. I should have gone back down to the common floor, but there’s someone else down there and he looks scary, Mr Stark—“

“Who the hell—“ Tony interrupted, and was interrupted in turn by JARVIS who said–

“Secretary Ross, Sir. He aided with the coordination efforts before the battle in Central Park.”

“Of course he did,” Tony muttered. “Okay, that’s a problem for later. Kid, you can stay up here if you want.”

“Thank you, Mr Stark,” Peter said. “And— tell Mr Loki that I hope he feels better, okay? I know what it’s like to lose someone, even if you only almost lose them, and…” Peter’s expression broke, his eyes going wide and watery. “Just make sure he knows he’s got more people that care about him, okay?”

“Yeah, kid,” said Tony, giving him a smile that was a tad warmer than the last. “I can do that.”

Tony felt like his steps were dragging as he walked toward their bedroom, though he equally wanted to race to the door as quickly as he could. He wanted to help Loki but he wasn’t sure if he knew how, and he was worried about what he was going to find. He’d never quite seen Loki so broken apart before. But when he reached the room he didn’t hesitate, pushing the door open quietly.

Loki was curled into a tight ball on his side of the bed, his arms around his legs and his head pressed into his knees. The curve of his spine was pressed hard against the headboard, the pillow thrown aside. He was still wearing his armour but for the helmet, the leather and the heavy boots leaving smudges of mud all over the expensive sheets. His hair was a mess, unbound and tangled across his hidden face and his knees, and Tony’s heart was in his throat just from looking at him.

“Loki,” Tony said softly. “Hey, it’s just me. Do you mind if I come in?”

There was no response from Loki, neither a flinch nor a relaxing of abused muscles. It was like Loki had just shut down, blocking out the rest of the world. But Tony was sure that Loki could hear him, and he knew of only one thing that he could say.

“Thor’s alive, you know,” Tony said, taking another step into the room. Still there was no reaction, so Tony said– “I know what you saw– what we all saw. He did die. But Strange has the Time Stone, remember? He reversed what happened, turned around the localised time stream on an extremely small scale, or something, and Thor came back. He’s okay.”

Tony almost sagged with relief when Loki finally looked up at that, his green eyes peering over his knees with dull curiosity. He took that as permission to move a little closer, walking slowly around the bed and perching on the edge of the mattress at Loki’s feet, but not making any move to reach out. He didn’t want to elicit a reaction like the one he had in the park.

“This is not the end,” Tony said, his voice cracking. “We haven’t had the chance to show Thanos all that we’re worth, yet. We just need to keep fighting.”

“I haven’t given up.” They were the first words that Loki had spoken since he had left Central Park, and his voice sounded hoarse. “I’m just… thinking.”

“Thinking,” Tony echoed, turning the word over in his mouth. “Yeah, okay. I’ve been thinking too,
but— you know you you’re going to have to— I mean, Thor’s going to be downstairs, soon—

“I know,” Loki interrupted. He lifted his head from his knees properly then, and despite the red mark on his forehead from the prolonged pressure his eyes were burning with determination, nothing like the dull green they had been when Tony had first sat down. “I heard you, Anthony. I heard you say that Thor is alive, but that does not negate the fact that Thanos did kill him. And he is going to suffer for that.”

“He will,” Tony said, only half noticing the strangeness of using another being's suffering as a method of comfort. The purple thumb fucking deserved it, anyway. “We’ll make sure of it. But not now. Right now, we just need to recuperate.”

“You know as well as I that we cannot waste time,” Loki replied.

And yeah, that was true. But Loki looked shattered and Tony was so tired.

“It’s been a long day,” Tony tried.

Loki’s eyes lingered on Tony’s bloodstained clothing. “Yes,” he agreed. “It has. You should rest.”

In one fluid movement Loki uncoiled and stood from the bed, his every movement screaming avoidance.

“You should, too,” Tony said firmly. He’d had one hell of day, sure, what with the alien attack, the abduction, the torture, the Guardians, the second alien attack— but Loki had suffered far worse. He’d faced his worst nightmare in the form of an angry dwarf, and then his other worst nightmare with Thanos, as well as thinking for a moment that he had come close to losing Tony and then actually losing Thor. Really, it was a wonder that Loki was still able to stand at all.

But Loki refused the offer of rest, shaking his head and actually backing away from the bed.

Startled, Tony jumped to his feet as well. He recognised that look all too well. He had just hoped he wouldn’t see it again.

“Don’t go,” he asked— pleaded, stumbling toward Loki. “Please. Stay.”

Loki’s expression softened. “I’m not leaving,” he said, brushing his fingers to Tony’s cheek and swiping his thumb across the line of his goatee. “I just want to be alone to think. I will come back. I promise.”

Tony leaned into Loki’s touch but it was gone almost as soon as it had begun, a fleeting whisper of fingertips that faded to nothing.

The way that Loki kept disappearing didn’t annoy him— he was just worried.

“Where is he, J?” Tony asked, a desperate strain in his voice.

When there was no response, Tony knew that could only mean one thing. Loki had clearance equal to Tony with JARVIS, after all.

“Is he in Malibu?” Tony asked, thinking. "Or is he somewhere other than Malibu?"

“He isn’t… not in Malibu,” JARVIS replied, audibly relieved that Tony had managed to get it out of him.

It was odd, being on this side of things, but at least he managed to get an answer. If Loki had gone to
Malibu then that meant that he was planning on keeping his word– he must know that Tony would be able to work out where he had gone even with promising JARVIS to keep silence. Maybe he really did just want to think.

Tony eyed the dirty sheets on the bed speculatively. Knowing, now, that Loki was safe, he wanted nothing more than to just collapse on the soft mattress and let his problems fall away into the darkness of sleep. It was still early enough– the sun had not long disappeared below the buildings of Manhattan, the early summer evening warmth not yet gone from the windows. But it had been a long, long day.

He couldn’t deny that he felt covered in grime, though, and he knew that his aching muscles would only ache worse in the morning if he did nothing for them, god-like healing or not. So he dragged his heavy feet into the bathroom, pulling roughly at his clothes and not bothering to put them in the hamper, just leaving them where they fell. JARVIS had the shower running at the perfect steaming temperature by the time he made into the cubicle, and he groaned as the powerful stream hit his shoulders, performing something of a massage all on its own.

Tony had always managed to find a special kind of bliss in the shower, even after he had begun to avoid still water after his soirée in an Afghan cave. The warmth and the pressure and the overwhelming comfort always helped him think, helped him sort his always twisting and whirring thoughts into order. But in that moment, standing under the hot stream of water, he found that he couldn’t stop his mind from running away from him. He couldn’t hide from the truth of what had happened in the minutes before.

Loki was in pain, and Tony… didn’t know how to help him.

Tony’s fist cracked against the shower wall, the sharp ache doing nothing to stem the turmoil in his mind and the sick feeling in his gut.

“Fuck.”

——•——

The bedroom was still just as achingly empty when Tony exited the shower. JARVIS let him know that most of the Avengers had returned to the common floor, along with most of the Guardians– with only Steve, Barnes, Wilson, Drax, and Rhodey remaining out to make sure that the streets were clear of any remaining Outriders.

Tony wanted to care, but he felt so very drained. He was just… tired, and there was nothing that Tony wanted more than to just curl up under the covers and sleep for about ten years.

He didn’t pay any attention the rumpled side of the bed, still dusted with dirt and just as painfully deserted as it had been for the past several days. He didn’t bother with pyjamas, either– he simply pulled back the covers on his own side and settled down, trying and failing to find a position that he could sleep in.

He couldn’t say how long he lay there, curled uncomfortably on his side with his head aching from tiredness but his mind just refusing to switch off. He couldn’t stop thinking about Thanos, about Quill’s Gamora, about the broken Infinity Gauntlet. He thought about Proxima Midnight, a person that Tony had never so much as laid eyes on locked deep underwater in the belly of the Raft. He thought about Eitri, the dwarf that had made Loki’s sceptre, and he thought about Ross sitting just downstairs. All these pieces of a puzzle that so clearly fit together, though Tony couldn’t quite see exactly how.
It could have been hours or minutes before he heard the soft creak of leather being dropped to the carpet and he found something solid for his mind to focus on. He held his breath when he felt the mattress shift with the weight of another person, the covers sliding over his shoulders as they were pulled back. He released it in a soft exhale when he felt Loki settle behind him, close enough to feel the coolness from his skin, but too far for contact.

“I know you don’t want to talk,” Tony said, not turning nor even opening his eyes. “But I’m still here.”

Loki remained silent but he curled in closer, his arm sliding around Tony’s waist and pressing their bodies more tightly together. Cool breath skimmed along Tony’s skin, and Tony sighed at the sensation of finally feeling him close.

“Having someone to support you doesn’t make the problems go away, or even lessen their weight,” Tony whispered softly, slotting his fingers gently between Loki’s. “It just makes them easier to bear.”

“I know,” Loki murmured, his lips brushing a soft kiss to the bare skin at Tony’s shoulder. “And I am grateful.”

They didn’t say anything else, content with the comfort of each other’s presence, and Tony fell asleep not long after.
“Do we not get five minutes?” Tony complained, throwing his hands up in frustration.
“We just fought off a giant alien with a fetish for dangerous jewellery. Can’t we just have five minutes to gather our thoughts?”

Why is it that every time I go to write a chapter I write twice as much as I thought I would and inevitably end up having to cut the chapter in half? Why?

When Tony woke up after an impossible number of hours’ sleep, his groggy mind half convinced him that he’d dreamt Loki coming back. But the rise and fall of the chest under his cheek grounded him in the now, and he sighed happily as he brushed the cool skin with his lips.

Loki groaned and, still half asleep, pushed at Tony’s shoulder in an attempt to stop the tickling. That, of course, only served to make Tony grin and begin to be purposefully irritating, running his nose back and forth and trailing his fingers across a spot at Loki’s hip that he knew to be particularly sensitive. The predicted shove was harder this time, and Tony was flipped over, falling onto his back with a laugh. His grin widened as Loki rolled with him, resting his elbows either side of Tony as he leaned down.

“Morning,” Tony said, grinning up at him.

With another groan, Loki let his full weight collapse onto Tony’s chest, effectively pinning him to the mattress. Then, Loki’s nose was nuzzling at Tony’s throat— and usually, Tony would have revelled in it, but there was something extra prickly about the sensation that wasn’t usually present.

It tickled.

Tony whined and squirmed and choked on a giggle, but Loki didn’t let up. He must have been using magic— Tony knew he wasn’t ticklish in that spot, but everywhere Loki touched was left with an overwhelming sensation of goose bumps and electric tingles.

“Okay, okay,” Tony gasped, pushing uselessly against Loki’s shoulder, “I’ll let you sleep, just quit it—“

Loki laughed, his soft chuckles pressing against Tony’s skin as the prickling dissipated.

“Bastard,” Tony said fondly, raising a hand to stroke Loki’s hair.

“Hmm, yes.” Loki lifted his head, rocking back up on his elbows just enough to touch his lips to Tony’s for half a second. But that just wouldn’t do, so Tony tilted up his chin and buried his fingers into Loki’s hair to coax him back down. He stole another kiss and deepened it with a swipe of his
tongue, keeping his movements smooth and slow. Loki sighed into him and shifted his weight, bringing one of his hands down to rest on Tony’s hip, gripping tightly with his fingers while his mouth caressed Tony’s with reverent, yet stimulating strokes.

Tony pulled back first, desperate to catch a breath, and Loki simply moved his attentions to Tony’s throat. It certainly didn’t tickle this time— it only ignited everything he was already feeling with a surge of yearning need, and Tony arched up into the press of Loki’s body with a shuddering moan.

Loki glanced up at the sound, smiling with delight. “Anthony,” he said, his voice low and his eyes glittering. “I am not tired.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, bringing their lips back together. “Neither am I.”

The sex was gentle and languid and sweet, full of soft touches that burned with no less passion than if they had been rough and fast. They held each other tightly and didn’t look away, only closing their eyes at the last moment when it became too difficult to resist, not wanting to miss a single flutter of expression, a single flash of desire. It was the simplest thing in the world, and it was euphoric.

Yet… it didn’t feel unhurried. There was an edge to the way that Loki moved, in the pressure of his fingers as he held on just a little bit too tight, like he was afraid that Tony was going to be taken from him. And afterward, when they lay sated and boneless with their limbs tangled together under the sheets, Tony thought he could feel Loki tremble.

But then JARVIS spoke up, and the moment was broken.

“Sirs, you are needed on the common floor,” JARVIS told them, his artificial voice quieter than usual, almost reluctant. “The Avengers have been waiting for quite some time.”

Tony groaned, and pressed his face into Loki’s shoulder.

“How desperately are we needed, JARVIS?” Loki asked, sighing and trailing his fingers over Tony’s spine in a gesture that felt far too final for Tony hold on to any hope of ignoring the summons.

“Mr Stark is needed as soon as is possible,” JARVIS said. “You, Sir, are merely requested to join him, though from what I understand your presence is not imperative to the discussion.”

Well, Tony thought, if they’d been waiting a while that meant that JARVIS had probably held off on delivering the message at least a bit. Good old JARVIS.

“In that case, I need to have a shower,” Loki said as he gently pulled away from Tony and shoved the covers back. “But you go on ahead, my dear.”

Tony grinned. “I could—“

“No,” Loki said, his lips twitching in amusement. “You know we don’t have time. Your team might come searching for you if you take much longer.”

Pulling a face, Tony said— “That’s gross, Loki, they know better than that.”

“It’s not the team that you need to worry about, Sirs,” JARVIS cut in. “Secretary Ross is growing impatient.”

“Do we not get five minutes?” Tony complained, throwing his hands up in frustration as he headed into the bathroom to give himself a quick wipe down. He’d realised that Loki was right— he didn’t
have the time for a proper shower, let alone anything else. “We just fought off a giant alien with a
fetish for dangerous jewellery. Can’t we just have five minutes to gather our thoughts?”

“You have had fourteen hours, Sir,” JARVIS replied.

“Rhetorical question, J,” Tony snapped.

“You knew that we wouldn’t get a respite,” Loki said, stepping up behind Tony where he stood at
the sink, wrapping his arms around his waist and pressing a soft kiss under his ear. “The universe is
at war. We are needed.”

“Fuck the universe,” Tony muttered. “I just want to catch my breath. Too much has happened, and
—” Tony paused, realising something. “You haven’t even seen Thor yet.”

As soon as he said the words he regretted them, as Loki’s smile fell away and his brow became
pinched.

“I believe what you told me,” Loki replied, letting go of Tony’s waist and stepping back. “I know he
is alive. What do I need to see him for?”

“You should talk to him,” Tony tried, figuring that since he’d already ruined the soft atmosphere he
might as well take it all the way.

“Thor and I spoke on Asgard,” Loki said. “He is alive. Nothing has changed, and I have nothing
more to say.”

“You know that isn’t true.”

“Isn’t it?” Loki turned to go to the shower, but Tony caught his arm, holding him back.

“You saw what happened to him,” Tony said. “And I saw what it did to you. That’s not something
you just bounce back from, and I—“ He breathed deep, and swallowed hard. “Sorry. I know, you’d
rather just— but I don’t know how to help. Maybe, if talking to me isn’t enough, maybe talking to
him—“

“You are helping just fine, my love,” Loki said quietly.

Loki’s expression was strangely soft as he ran a hand down the side of Tony’s cheek, his thumb
gliding over Tony’s goatee in a very similar manner to his parting touch the night before. Tony could
see the tension and worry in Loki’s gaze, so he plastered on the most comforting grin that he could
and leaned up to press a chaste kiss to Loki’s still swollen lips.

“Come down when you’re ready,” Tony said. “Take all the time you need.”

Loki nodded, and turned back to the shower without another word.

It was a bit worrying– Loki seemed to be falling into old habits, going back to adopting the ostrich
strategy rather than just dealing with things before they got any worse.

Tony would have to talk with Loki again later. He was needed downstairs. He didn’t want to leave
his team to deal with Ross for any longer than strictly necessary, and if Ross wanted to speak to him
personally, well. Ross had best be prepared, because Tony had been in a good mood– and when it
came to him, at least, a good mood interrupted made for a far worse attitude than if it had been sour
in the first place.
After putting on some clothes for the day he had been intending to head straight down, but Tony paused when he reached the living room. There was a red and blue lump on the couch, covered partially in the heavy afghan that usually lived in a drawer under the television. Peter was fast asleep, and had clearly been there all night. There was a water bottle and a half eaten packet of Doritos that he must have found in the kitchenette on the floor beside him, and his hair was sticking up in all manner of directions. The Iron Spider suit was in the corner of the room, standing watch.

Tony stood and just looked for a moment, taking in the sight. The kid had clearly been exhausted, and after finding something to eat had just collapsed on the first available space. He looked uncomfortable on the couch but his expression was relaxed, smoothed by a touch of innocence that Tony feared was no longer present when the kid was awake. Tony was loath to break the tranquillity but the kid’s neck was at a bad angle and the watching was growing a little creepy, so he bent down over Peter, grasped his shoulder, and shook.

“Hey, kid,” he said softly. “Come on, wake up.”

Peter’s eyes opened groggily, his arms reaching above his head in a stretch. “Mr Stark?” he asked, his voice clammy with tiredness.

“Morning kid,” Tony said cheerfully. “Sleep well?”

“Your couch is actually better than most peoples,’” Peter groaned, pulling himself upright.

“It had better be, it was expensive,” Tony said. “Are you okay? You know you could have used one of the bedrooms, right?”

Peter mumbled something under his breath, his cheeks flushing pink.

“What was that?” Tony asked. “If it’s because you weren’t sure if you were allowed– kid, when I said you could stay, I didn’t mean for you to destroy your back by sleeping on the couch—“

“I said I didn’t know which one was yours,” Peter blurted. “What if you and Mr Loki were— all the doors were shut, and I didn’t want to accidentally interrupt, okay?”

“Well, that’s considerate of you,” Tony said.

“That’s not what I meant,” Peter groaned, burying his face in his hands. “I just— Mr Loki looked upset, and I—“

“You thought I might have been cheering him up, and you didn’t want to walk in on anything,” Tony said with a straight face, nodding seriously.

“Oh my god,” Peter groaned. “Please. Stop.”

“All right, all right,” Tony chuckled. “New question. Have you called Aunt May yet?”

Peter didn’t need to respond verbally. The expression of absolute horror that morphed across his face was answer enough.

“Do not worry, Sir,” said JARVIS. “I have taken care of it.”

“Oh, man, was she angry?” Peter asked.

“Merely relieved that you are safe and healthy, Mr Parker,” JARVIS replied. “And Sir, she sends her
thanks for keeping him out of the line of fire— the second time, at least. I have yet to inform her about
the trip into space.”

“JARVIS,” Tony said, his voice infused with the same emotion that he greeted coffee with in the
morning. “You are an absolute godsend.”

“As it was Mr Liesmith who suggested that I contact Mrs Parker, Sir, I believe that you are correct.”

“Oh,” said Peter, turning red again. It was actually quite adorable, and Tony mentally high-fived
himself for making it happen twice in a row. He’d have to keep a tally. But then Peter glanced back
to the couch, and when Tony followed his gaze, his eyes widened in surprise.

“Hey, kid,” Tony asked, “did you grab the blanket?”

“Uh,” Peter rubbed the back of his neck, his cheeks darkening further. “No?”

Huh.

Well, Tony figured he shouldn’t be all that surprised. Loki had harboured a soft spot for the kid for
quite some time, now.

“Also, Sir,” JARVIS added, “since your mortality has undergone a recent change in status, and you
are my creator, you could indeed say that I was sent by a god.”

Tony shot a glare in the direction of the nearest hidden camera, hoping that Peter wouldn’t—

“Is he talking about the golden apples?” Peter asked.

Goddamn it. Tony had been hoping that Peter and Steve would forget about that with everything else
that happened afterward, but apparently the universe wasn’t willing to do him any favours. Or
JARVIS, for that matter— Tony wouldn’t put it past the meddling AI to have brought it up on
purpose. He was still human, for fuck’s sake. He was still mostly the same, they didn’t have to worry
about it. Bloody JARVIS.

“Look,” Tony said firmly, “I know that it’s messing with the natural order or whatever, but this really
is my choice, no one else’s, and—“

“Whoa, whoa,” said Peter, holding up his hands. “Mr Stark, I told you before, I think it’s awesome.
Honestly.”

Tony paused. “You do?”

“Well, yeah.” Peter tilted his head. “You can live as long as Mr Loki now. I’ve seen enough movies
to know that it was only going to end in tears, otherwise.”

Tony blinked. Then smirked. “You know,” he said casually, “I never would’ve pegged you as a
Twilight fan.”

“What?” Peter blanched. Then he swallowed, straightened, raised his chin and said— “What do you
mean? I was talking about— erm— Hercules—“

“Seriously?” Tony asked. “That’s not going to—“

“And Doctor Who!” Peter said triumphantly. “That scene with Rose is just so sad—“

“You’re not helping your case, here,” Tony commented.
“I’ve seen you cry at Frodo and Sam during movie night,” Peter huffed, crossing his arms. “So you’re just being a hypocrite.”

“Accusing someone of being a hypocrite is just a way of pointing out that you don’t know how to win the argument,” Tony said with a grin.

“Oh, come on,” Peter complained.

“You’d make a terrible politician, kid.”

“And you, Sir,” JARVIS cut in. “Are still running late.”

“And that’s my cue,” Tony said, giving a little wave and moving for the elevator. “See you later, kid. You can keep sleeping if you want, but not on the couch– JARVIS will make sure you don’t interrupt Loki’s shower. Just don’t forget to call Aunt May, and if you do go home leave the Iron Spider here, please. I need to check how the systems held up to the space trip.”

“I don’t even want to be a politician,” Peter mumbled in lieu of a parting goodbye, and Tony let out a laugh as he heard the kid begin to shuffle down the hallway toward a more comfortable place to sleep.

Having successfully dodged a conversation that no doubt would have been emotional and soppy and everything Tony did not want to have to deal with that morning, he entered the elevator with a grin.

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The smile lasted only as long as it took for Tony to step out of the elevator and take stock of the scene on the Avengers’ common floor. Only Secretary Ross appeared to be entirely awake and properly put together, sat at one end of the large table with a briefcase in his lap and an annoyed expression on his face. Thor was sat at the other end, staring morosely at an untouched piece of plain toast that was sat on a plate in front of him. He had heavy circles below his eyes, as if he had not slept a wink since returning from the dead. He was wearing jeans and a plaid shirt that wasn’t buttoned correctly, and his hair was unbrushed and unbound, the braids twisted lankly among various knots. Steve was beside him, looking equally exhausted and twisting a glass of orange juice between his fingers, though he was somehow managing not to spill a single drop. Natasha sat next to him, and Clint opposite her, with Bruce in between Clint and Thor, his eyes wide and worried but focused on his bowl of muesli. Prince T’Challa was leaning against the counter, chewing absently on a protein bar of some kind – and wow, but the Prince of Wakanda was in Tony’s building, that was awesome, though it was a bit of a surprise. Sam was in the kitchen, waiting beside the toaster, though his gaze was settled on Ross. None of the others were there and the Guardians were not present, either, and for that, Tony supposed, he could only be grateful.

“Aliens, Stark,” Ross said by way of greeting, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

“Yes,” Tony agreed, heading straight for the kitchen and the coffee pot that he could spy ready made on the counter, full of hot black liquid, just as Tony liked it. That gesture had Steve written all over it, and had Tony not been entirely focused on Ross he might have even said a thank you. But– “There were aliens,” Tony continued as he poured the coffee into his favourite, oversized Iron Man mug. “We fought them in the park yesterday, well done for noticing.”

“I want to talk about the aliens you brought back with you from your interstellar trip,” Ross said tersely. “They are not here with permission.

“I thought you talked to Cap about that yesterday,” Tony pointed out, taking a seat beside Clint.
“Only briefly,” Ross said. “Captain Rogers was kind enough to describe the circumstances that lead to their presence on US soil, but he thought it best that proper discussion regarding their future waited until you made yourself available.”

Tony shot Steve a betrayed look.

“It’s your tower,” Steve shrugged.

“Yes,” Tony agreed, jumping on that train immediately and without hesitation. “It is. My tower. So I say the aliens— and Prince T’Challa, for that matter, can stay here.”

“Actually,” said T’Challa, “I am the King of Wakanda, now.”

There was a pause.

“I’m sorry,” said Thor, and T’Challa lowered his head in thanks.

“How did we not hear about this?” Ross asked.

“The affairs of my country are the not the business of yours,” T’Challa said. “My father was killed in a crusade for revenge, and I became king by the traditional rites of my people. You need not know any more.”

“Just the aliens, then,” Tony said, cutting in to spare the poor guy. “Since I guess this means that King T’Challa has diplomatic immunity, and therefore may stay here as he likes. But yes— Ross, I give the Guardians my permission to be here.”

“This is still America, Stark, whether it’s your tower or not,” Ross snapped. “Your aliens do not hold visas, and therefore they are here illegally.”

“Are you even listening to yourself, Sir?” Clint broke in. “Visas? For aliens? The ones who attacked didn’t have a green card either. ICE is not going to be able to defeat Thanos on their own.”

“The Guardians are here to help,” Tony agreed. “If not for them, the damages yesterday would have been far greater.”

“I will meet them.” Ross’ tone was final, and left no room for argument.

So, of course, Tony argued.

“I’m not going to let you imprison them or study them, or even interrogate them,” Tony told him.

“Sir,” said JARVIS.

“Not now, J,” Tony dismissed, turning back to Ross. “They’re here to help us,” he stressed again. “They deserve to be treated with at least some respect.”

Some being the operative word there, Tony thought, though he wasn’t going to talk to Ross about how annoying the racoon could be.

“I didn’t say ‘study’, Stark,” said Ross. “I said ‘meet’.”

Well, excuse me if I don’t trust you based on your track record. Tony didn’t say it, but he knew he wasn’t the only one thinking it– Bruce was looking very tense, and Steve’s lips were pressed in a tight, tight line.
“Sir,” JARVIS said again. “Sir, I must insist that...“

Tony glanced up, worried when the AI cut himself off. “J? What is it?”

There was a pause, and then-- “I am sorry for the interruption, Sir,” JARVIS said stiffly. “There is no need to worry.”

Tony frowned, feeling guilty for his earlier dismissal. The last time he had ignored JARVIS when something bad was happening... “Are you all right?”

“I am perfectly fine, Sir,” JARVIS replied. “There is no need to worry about me.”

“Okay,” said Tony, his frown deepening as he caught the inflection. “If you’re sure.”

JARVIS replied with the affirmative, and Tony allowed himself to be drawn back to the conversation.

“There is precedent for this.”

Every eye in the room turned to Natasha, who raised an eyebrow. Out of all the Avengers, she looked the most put together-- still wearing light grey sweats and a black tank that she had probably slept in, but her red hair was neat and the mug in her hands was the only indication of any tiredness.

“What do you mean, Agent Romanov?” asked Ross.

“Thor and Loki,” Natasha answered with a shrug. “They’re aliens, but they’ve been here on a semi-permanent basis for years. Have the Guardians sign the same subsection of the Avengers Accords as the Asgardians.” She glanced around in barely concealed amusement. “Am I honestly the only one who thought of that?”

—•—

It was going to take a while for Ross to get approval from the Accords Council. Tony pulled some tools and some screens from his workshop to do a few repairs on both his Mark L and the Iron Spider that JARVIS brought down from the penthouse, bringing it all to the couch in the Avengers’ living room so he could keep an eye on the proceedings. It wasn’t ideal, but it worked. JARVIS, meanwhile, seemed to have got over his earlier bout of strangeness, promising Tony that there wasn’t anything amiss in the penthouse and that he had nothing to worry about.

In the meantime, Barnes joined them on the common floor and signed the Avengers Accords that Ross had brought with him for that very purpose. They summoned Strange to sign as well, and found that they’d need an altered version for him, too-- while he was willing to sign on behalf of his own organisation (not, he was careful to mention, every magic user in the world, but only those who obeyed the rules of his bloody cult), the Masters of the Mystic Arts were already international, and would therefore need a different set of rules than the American-based Avengers.

The whole thing was a bit of a mess and Tony thought it would be easier if they just did it on an individual basis, let Strange sign and work with the Avengers, and don’t worry about the rest of the wizards for now. Focus on the problem they had now, focus on just making everything easier for the battle they still had yet to win, and not focus on the fact that Loki still hadn’t come downstairs from his shower.

Tony put down his screwdriver and rubbed his hands across his face, trying to clear the thought.

To be honest, Tony doubted that they’d get the Guardians to sign anything anyway, and he voiced
his concerns to the others.

“They’re criminals,” Tony said. “They admit it themselves. They’re not going to want to put their names on a legal document.”

“I did,” Clint said with a smile, “and technically—”

“You’re reformed,” Natasha interrupted, causing Clint to pout.

“Stark’s got a point, though,” said Sam.

“Well,” said Steve, his attempt at a placating smile telling the world that he agreed with Tony wholeheartedly. “We won’t know until we try.”

So, when Ross came back with the approval of the Council and a copy of the Accords that Thor and Loki had signed, they called for the Guardians and tried.

“If I sign this, I’m not going to end up owing my soul to Jesus or something, am I?” Quill asked.

Ross’ eye twitched, but thankfully he didn’t try to comment.

“Who cares?” Rocket asked. “We all know we’re just going to ignore it anyway. I’ve signed stuff in the past.”

Drax tilted his head in confusion. “People have asked your permission for something?”

Rocket shrugged, not appearing to take offence. “ Mostly it was about paying for stuff. Or getting paid. I held up my end when it was the second one.”

“Look, boys,” said Natasha, putting on a truly inspiring show of patience. “We’ve all had moments where we ignore a contract, but you generally don’t talk about it in front of the person you’re signing it for.”

“Oh yeah, okay, that’s fair;” said Rocket. Then he turned to Ross, who still hadn’t quite recovered from the novelty of being talked to by a raccoon. That, it seemed, had rattled him even more than Mantis’ earlier and truly hilarious declaration of him being full of frustration had. “You don’t have to worry, I’m definitely going to be keeping the contract on this. You’re paying us, right?”

“You get to stay in my Tower for now,” Tony said quickly. “I’ll pay for all you need while you’re here.”

“All we need?” Quill asked, grinning widely. “Sweet.”

Tony, somehow, had the feeling that he was going to regret that.

“I am Groot,” Groot said happily, and Ross flinched again.

“I’ll sign it,” said Drax. “If writing my name on this paper means that I am able to enlist these humans in fighting Thanos with me, then I will do it.” He looked to Quill. “You see? I understood this metaphor.”

Quill looked entirely unimpressed. “Dude. That’s not a metaphor.”

Drax frowned. “You told me a metaphor was when one thing means another thing. If I sign this, it means that they will fight for us against Thanos. So it’s a metaphor.”
“Oh my god,” groaned Clint. “Just sign the damn thing!”

“All right,” said Quill. “We’ll sign it, but only on the condition that you help us. I know what Earthlings are like, I saw enough movies as a kid, and I need your promise that you’re not just going to destroy Thanos before we find out what’s happened to Gamora. We can’t destroy him until I know for sure.”

“You do not get a say in this,” Ross snapped, seeming to shake himself out of his funk. It hadn’t lasted long, but then, the guy had known about the Hulk and other such fantastic oddities for years. Shame. “Either you sign it, or you are placed into custody until we can decide what to do with you.”

“That doesn’t seem right,” said Clint. Tony put a comforting hand on Bruce’s shoulder, trusting that the other man would be able to hold it together fine but wanting him to know that he had the support nonetheless.

“We won’t help you if you don’t help us,” Quill argued.

“Thanos wishes to destroy half the universe,” said Steve, stepping in with his calming and authoritative Captain America Voice™. “I know you want to save her, Quill, and we will do our best. But she wouldn’t want you to—“

“How the hell do you know what she wants?” Quill asked. “You never even met her—“

“If she’s the sort of person you say she is, then she wouldn’t want you to throw away an opportunity to end all of this,” Steve continued.

“She could be dead already,” Quill snapped. “She could be, and I wouldn’t even know. You can’t understand how that feels!”

“Okay, stop,” Tony snapped. Because he did know how that felt. He’d lived for three months in a cave without knowing whether Rhodey had been exploded or not in the attack on the convoy. He’d seen Pepper locked up and tortured by a fire-breathing monster. He’d waited while Happy was in the ICU— hell, he’d suffered through Peter being kidnapped by a maniac, and he’d spent a week on Earth while he’d thought Loki was going up to fight Thanos with only his brother as back up. He knew what it was to feel helpless while not knowing what was happening to someone you loved, but in every single one of those terrifying moments he’d manned up and done what was needed to help everyone else, to solve the fucking problem and make things right. Quill needed to get his head in the game, especially when there was hope for Gamora. “You saw the Infinity Gauntlet before Hulk smashed it, right?” he asked. “Thanos has two Stones at the moment. Two. That means that he doesn’t know where the Soul Stone is yet, and that means that Gamora is still alive.”

Quill looked a little taken aback that Tony had known what it was that Thanos wanted from Gamora, but he didn’t argue the point, and after that the Guardians all signed, in the end. Drax first, followed by Mantis, who had remained quiet but seemed happy to go along with the decision made by the rest of her team. Groot was last, struggling to hold a pen, but he made a mark on the dotted line and that was enough for Ross.

“I expect to be kept up to date, Captain,” Ross said as he packed the papers away into his briefcase. “Any further movements must be reported to me.”

Tony wasn’t surprised by the deferral to Steve— he was used to being passed over by officials when it came to the Avengers. His skills as a businessman were useful when it came to negotiation, but when orders were being given? Yeah, they all went to Steve. He wasn’t bitter about it either, because Steve was a good leader— but that didn’t mean that he wasn’t allowed to be offended.
With Ross finally gone, the Avengers began to disperse into their rooms for another well-earned nap. Bruce had offered his spare bed to T’Challa the night before – the lucky bastard – and Strange went back to his own medieval mansion. The Guardians had been set up in Thor’s room, and Steve, despite already having agreed to open his floor to Barnes and Sam, had offered that Thor could stay with him as well. When Thor asked if the offer was still open for a nap, Steve agreed immediately.

“Thank you,” Thor said. “I do need some more sleep, I think. I have not yet fully recovered, and I would rest again before continuing to plan our next move against Thanos.”

Thor went to follow Steve to the elevator, but Tony, seeing an opportunity, left the Iron Spider to its own self-updating capabilities and grabbed his attention.

“Hey Thor,” Tony called. Later, he might blame tiredness for his rashness, but he needed to speak with the guy. He’d wanted to ever since the conversation on board the Milano, before the fight in Central Park. He knew Thor had been through a lot, but he didn’t think that should overrule everything else that had happened. Other people may like to bury their heads in the sand, but between Loki and Quill and every other fucking person, Tony had just had enough. He’d long since reached a breaking point. “Can I talk to you?”

“Of course,” said Thor, looking to Tony expectantly.

Tony waited for Steve and the others to file out before opening his mouth, knowing in the back of his mind that it probably wasn’t his business to be butting in anyway, and that it certainly wasn’t anyone else’s.

“Have you talked to Loki yet?” Tony asked, jumping right in as soon as the room was clear.

Thor looked a little taken aback.

“No,” he said. “Why?”

“He’s a little rattled,” Tony said, fighting to keep his voice even. “He went through a lot yesterday, you know.”

“Yes,” said Thor. “I know. We all did, and we all should rest.”

“He needs more than rest,” Tony said, his anger starting to bubble at Thor’s callousness. “He needs —“

“I need some time to recover,” Thor said. “I just—“

“No, you—“ Tony gnashed his teeth together, trying and utterly failing to get a hold on his anger. “So you died, big deal. I want to talk to you about what happened before that.”

Thor didn’t even pretend to misunderstand. “Niðavellir,” he said, deflating immediately. “Tony—“

“How could you?” Tony asked. “How could you send him there?”

“It was there, or Thanos,” Thor said, raising his voice and spreading his palms by his side. “I had to protect him—“

“And a swell job of that you did, yeah,” Tony snapped. “Sending him to his torturers—“

“Loki is more than capable of looking after himself,” Thor snapped. Then he sighed heavily, running a hand through his knotted blonde hair. “Loki has been through a lot,” he said, and when Tony went
to comment that he *already fucking knew that*, Thor held up a hand to stop him. “Tony, please, just try to understand. I know that what Loki suffered at the hands of the dwarves was brutal, but I also know that what he suffered because of Thanos was worse. When I asked him to come with me to Asgard, I did so because I knew that I needed his expertise with the Mind Stone, and then I thought that I could use his help on Knowhere as well. But when it came to actually taking him there…”

“You got cold feet,” Tony said. His tone wasn’t as blunt as it might have been– he got the feeling that Thor wasn’t used to baring himself like this, and he didn’t want to scare him off when there was a chance that he was about to gain some insight into what Loki was thinking.

“I…” Thor frowned. “That means to change your mind, yes?”

Tony nodded.

“Then yes,” Thor agreed. “My feet grew cold, and I knew that I could not bring Loki with me. He has not told me what happened to him during his time with Thanos, but I know that if it was enough for Loki to attack Midgard only to hide in Asgard’s dungeons to get away from him, then I knew it must have been too awful to comprehend. Loki doesn’t run away, Tony,” Thor said firmly, with the air of a man who had argued that point far too many times before. “He doesn’t run, he simply retreats far enough to be able to attack his unprepared enemy’s flank. Yet this time, he was happy to wait out the fight in a cell– until he met you.”

“So Loki was tortured by Thanos as well as the dwarves,” Tony said. “I know that Thor, but that didn’t mean you had to send him to—”

“Loki would never have let me go to Knowhere without him unless there was something of equal importance that needed his attention.” Thor sighed, and looked away. “I was afraid that if he saw Thanos, he would react badly– either freeze or act rashly, and either way he would be in danger. You see, when Thanos attacked Asgard he taunted my father and I with the knowledge of how he wished to punish Loki for his betrayal, and I could not face the chance of Loki suffering any of those awful things. I admit that Niðavellir was not a good choice, but it was something needed to be done and I knew that Loki would see through any fabrication. I am glad for the second chance that Strange has granted me. If this is the way that I had left things with my brother, I could never have fought joyfully in Valhalla. My soul would have been full of too much anguish.”

“I don’t think Loki would have coped well, either,” Tony muttered. Then he frowned, and asked– “Did you tell him all of this?”

“No,” Thor admitted, all of the remaining fight running out of him, his whole body sagging. “I tried, but he would not listen. I have hurt him too much in the past for him to take my words for what they are. We did talk some, though– he explained that he would not do such a thing for me again. I know that I have wronged him in the past, and I know that I need to work to make it right.”

“Good,” Tony replied. “Although it’s no wonder he snapped when you died. He would have been angry, before, but after everything he’d already dealt with in the same day—”

“Is he all right?” Thor asked worriedly.

“No,” Tony said, because it was the truth. “He’s pretending that he is, but he is so far from being all right.”

Thor’s expression cracked, but when he spoke, his words were bleeding with honesty. “You’re good for him, Tony,” he said. “Better than I have ever been.”
“You’re not getting off that easy,” Tony warned. “He’s clamming up, there’s something going on— he won’t talk to me about it, even though we’ve been through all this before. He’s not—” Tony cut himself off, looking away from Thor’s concerned expression. “I need to get through to him, but I don’t know how.”

“You will,” Thor said. “He loves you. He won’t—”

Thor was cut off as the elevator doors flew open with more speed than normal and Peter came careening out of them, running into the living room with desperate abandon.

“Mr Stark!” he gasped, spotting Tony and making a beeline. “You have to come up to the penthouse —“

“What is it?” Tony asked, catching Peter by the shoulders and exchanging a worried look with Thor. The god’s demeanour had changed in an instant— gone was the tired big brother, the exhaustion giving way to determination, his hand already reaching for Mjölnir. Tony looked back to Peter, tightening his grip and searching the kid’s face for an indication of what had happened. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Loki,” Peter said, and Tony’s heart plummeted to his feet before Peter even finished his sentence. “He’s gone.”

—•—

Peter and Thor followed Tony back up to the penthouse, Thor with a stony expression bordering on scared while Peter glanced between Tony and the elevator doors with just plain panic. The kid had managed to work himself up into a frenzy while attempting to decipher what JARVIS had been trying tell him, and Tony was doing his best not to let Peter’s nervousness infect him. Tony didn’t know why – he’d already heard from Peter that the floor was empty – but he had to see it for himself. He stormed through the penthouse and headed straight for their room, hoping that maybe there’d be something—

The armour that had been thrown on the floor the night before was gone, as was Loki’s sceptre. There wasn’t a note, and the bastard hadn’t even made the bed.

Loki had really just gone and left.

“Get the others,” Tony growled to JARVIS. He didn’t need to give any more instruction. By the time the three of them made it back to the common floor, it was once more full of Avengers— all of the Avengers in the Tower, with associates, friends, and Guardians included. Even Strange was there, having arrived via one of his portals, and JARVIS assured Tony that Rhodey and Maximoff were on their way, too. Tony explained the situation as best he could with frantic hand gestures, and Peter stepped in a couple times to fill in the blanks.

Loki, it seemed, had made JARVIS promise not only that he wouldn’t tell anyone where Loki had gone, but that he would also tell Tony that there was nothing to worry about. He had gone off on his own not just without letting Tony know, but after actively stopping Tony from being able to follow him.

JARVIS, though, rightly thought that Loki was being a stupid asshole (though admittedly JARVIS would probably use different words), and managed to not only awaken Peter but had helped him to work out what had happened without actively telling him. Peter, as JARVIS had predicted he would, had panicked and run straight for Tony.
JARVIS was definitely the best AI in the world, and Loki had a hell of a lot to answer for.

“Tony, calm down,” said Clint as Tony’s fist hit the table. “We know you’re a little on edge—“

“Yes, I’m fucking on edge,” Tony snarled. “Loki has gone on a suicide mission.”

“This is not like my brother,” Thor said, frowning. “He would not put himself in such danger—“

“You didn’t see him, Thor,” Steve said, shaking his head. “When you fell, he snapped. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I thought he was going to tear Thanos apart with his bare hands,” Natasha agreed. ”It's not surprising that he’d give it another shot.”

“You may not remember dying,” Tony muttered, “but the rest of us sure as hell remember watching it, Thor.”

“I thought my dying was a ‘big deal’,“ Thor muttered, frowning. “Is that not ‘nothing’ in Midgardian expression?”

“Tony,” Steve groaned, his tone dripping with disappointment. “You didn’t.”

Ignoring that, Tony leaned against the table, and spoke to the group as a whole.

“Loki’s gone to Titan,” he said, knowing that it was true. “If he’d gone anywhere else he wouldn’t have hidden it from me. So we need to get our asses into gear. I’m going to follow him, and you guys are going to need to hold the fort– if we come back with an army on our tail, you’re going to need to be ready.”

To their credit, none of the Avengers tried to say that it was a stupid idea. They didn’t try to argue that it was too dangerous, that Loki could take care of himself– or, god forbid, that Loki might already be gone. They simply nodded, and began to help Tony plan. Some of the newer allies looked a little sceptical, but didn’t speak up.

“You’re coming with me,” Tony said to Strange.

“I can’t go that far with my portals,” Strange replied, shaking his head. “Not if I don’t know where we’re going to land. If I don’t have a good enough picture in my mind, I could land us in the middle of space, or stuck half way in a wall.”

“You can see what’s on the other side of your portals before you go through, though,” said Clint.

“Oh yes, you’re absolutely right,” Strange drawled. “Tell me, do you think trial and error is going to get us to Titan in time to save Loki?”

“That’s fine, I don’t want you to come for that,” Tony cut in. He’d already guessed that about the portals– if, as Strange had confirmed regardless, they worked similarly to how Loki had described the Space Stone, then he wouldn’t have anything to go off. Tony, though, knew he would be able to get to where he needed to go. “You’ve got the Time Stone,” he continued. “We’ve all seen what it can do. Something goes wrong, you’re going to turn back the clock and we’re going to try again.”

“Wait,” said T’Challa. “I know that you wish to help your partner, Stark, but the whole planet is on the line. Are you sure that bringing Strange with you is the best plan?”

Had it been anyone else, Tony might have snapped. But since it was the King of freaking Wakanda,
he forced himself to take a breath and ask– “What do you mean?”

“I have not yet heard the whole story,” T’Challa admitted, “but from what I understand, Thanos is searching for these six Stones of power. You have one of them yes?”

Tony nodded.

“Strange has another.” T’Challa didn’t need confirmation for that one– he’d seen what had happened with Thor. “It’s too risky to take the two of them to Thanos at once. We will be handing both of our Stones to him on a silver platter.”

“Actually, we have three,” said Clint. “Loki’s got one too.”

T’Challa raised an unimpressed eyebrow, and Tony sighed.

“Okay, I know it’s risky,” he said. “But Thanos only has two of these things. We have three.”

“We’re not going to leave him, Tony,” said Steve. “That’s not an option. And if Strange doesn’t want to go with you, I will.”

“Yeah, he’s a total idiot for going by himself, but he’s still part of this team,” Clint agreed.

Tony smiled tightly. “Thanks, guys. But maybe T’Challa’s right—“

“No,” said Thor. “If you are to face Thanos, you will need those Stones to get out of there alive. As you said, Tony– between the three of you, you will have more Stones than Thanos.”

“Thor’s right, Tony,” said Sam. “I say you should go and show that purple bastard exactly what happens to folks who think they can mess with Earth.”

When Tony looked to T’Challa, the king looked like he remained unconvinced– but he gave a nod, acquiescing to the majority.

“All right,” Tony said. “Okay. Strange, you still in?”

“I’m going to regret it,” said Strange, “but fine. If I die, Stark Industries and the Avengers have to make sure that I get a State Funeral.”

Clint snorted.

“So,” said Quill, cutting in with deliberate casualness. “You’re just going to go and save the guy you’re in love with who’s probably been captured by Thanos, and you’re asking your buddies to help you. Is anyone else seeing a double standard? Smelling a little bit of hypocrisy?”

“That’s a big word for you, Quill,” Tony snapped. “And yes, I am. Because Loki hasn’t been captured, he’s fine, and as long I get there to help him, he’s going to stay that way.”

“You don’t know that,” Quill said.

“You’re right,” said Tony. “I don’t. I guess I do know how it feels, now, huh? Are you happy?”

“That’s not what I meant, dude,” Quill tried, but Tony wasn’t done.

“Loki’s strong, and he’s a fighter,” he said. “He’s also smart, and he won’t have just barged in there without a plan.” Tony paused, feeling like something was hammering against his chest as he realised– “That’s what he was doing last night, when he came back here by himself and then when
he went to Malibu– he was thinking, he was planning. He knows what he’s doing, but it’ll be a cold day in hell if I just leave him to do it by himself.”

“Then I’m coming too,” Quill announced, glancing around like he was daring anyone to contradict him.

“I thought you said I was being hypocritical,” Tony said, though in his surprise his words lacked bite.

“Yeah,” said Quill. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not coming. I want to see if Thanos has Gamora on Titan, and besides– you guys know nothing about space. You need me.”

“I am Groot,” said Groot, worriedly.

“Yeah, you’re right, it does sound dangerous,” said Rocket. “We’re staying here.”

“But I’m coming,” Quill said firmly.

“Okay,” Tony said. “Fine. But if you slow me down, or if you cause any trouble, you’re being left behind, you hear me?”

“Feeling the trust,” Quill muttered, but he didn’t complain. He turned to the other Guardians. “You guys stay here, make sure these idiots don’t come up with a stupid plan for when we get back.”

Drax looked put out, but did not argue.

“I will come with you, as well,” said Thor.

“We don’t need an army, we need a small force to get in and out quickly,” Tony snapped. “Three is already too many. We’re not taking anyone else.”

“How will you get there?” Thor argued. “Strange has said that his portals won’t work, but I have the Bifrost—“

“And I have this,” Tony countered, tapping a finger to his arc reactor. “I can get anywhere, remember?”

“Tony,” Steve said, stepping forward with a distressed frown. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I’ve seen you end up in the wrong place too many times, and you said yourself just yesterday that you were worried about trying such a long trip—“

“I did use the Stone yesterday,” Tony argued. “You saw it.”

“To defend yourself, not as a portal,” said Steve. “And I’m worried that was instinctual, and that when the time comes... I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“It’s okay, Cap. Loki explained how this works,” Tony told him. “I couldn’t aim the portals before because I need to be able to completely focus on the destination, to make sure that I’m not distracted by anything else. If I do that, if I think about where I want to go with single-minded focus, there won’t be any problems.”

“And you’re sure you can do that? You’re going to have to really focus,” Steve said worriedly.

“Tony, if you mess this up... that’s it.”

“Trust me, Steve,” Tony said, his eyes gleaming with fierce determination. “If I’m anything right now– I am entirely fucking focused.”
Chapter Summary

Loki glared. “I am perfectly capable of looking after myself,” he hissed. “And I am not here to ‘face’ Thanos.”

“Oh?” Tony asked. “Then why are you here? Tea and biscuits?”

The portal was remarkably easy to construct. All Tony had to do was focus on Loki – something that he’d always found remarkably easy – and use his iridium-augmented gauntlets, tapping into the power of the Space Stone. He’d had plenty of practice creating portals over the last couple weeks, and he was sure that this one would be perfect. With Quill and Strange at his side, he prepared to step forward into it when—

“Hey guys!”

Tony’s eyes snapped open in time to see a man just appear in the middle of the living room, wearing a red suit and a silver helmet.

The blue portal was bigger now, widening by the second, and Tony immediately knew that it wasn’t going to take him to Loki. His mind was on the intruder, his instincts flaring in a need to defend himself—

Tony panicked, but he knew what he needed to do. He thrust out with his right palm, pushing the portal away from him and the other people in the room. As he did so, the portal widened further, feeding from his distraction, and it was with a desperate shove that he managed to close it—unfortunately close to one of the most loved pieces of furniture in Avengers Tower.

“Aw, man,” said Clint staring at the empty space where the couch had just been swallowed up by the portal. “Not again.”

“Be thankful that wasn’t one of us,” Tony snapped. Most of the others had opted to leave the room while Tony formed the portal so as to minimise distraction, with only Sam and Clint staying to sate their curiosity and promising to remain silent.

Well, like that mattered now.

But that was still five people in the room – six counting the distraction – who could have been swept up to god only knows where. They were lucky they’d only lost the couch.

Fuming, Tony folded away his helmet before turning to the newcomer and demanding—“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Scott Lang. Ant-Man?” The declaration tilted up at the end like a question, and the man hit the side of his helmet, lifting the faceplate. He looked around at them curiously, his gaze pausing on Strange. “Dude. Nice threads.”

Strange frowned in annoyance, crossing his arms.
“Why would you call yourself Ant-Man?” Quill asked, making a face.

“It wasn’t my idea,” Lang admitted. “And anyway– why do you look so surprised? You guys asked for my help. Falcon said he’d meet me at Baskin-Robbins on 43rd last week, but he never showed. And I know you’ve been busy but you realise I live in San Francisco, right? I had to pay for my plane tickets myself, and accommodation in New York isn’t exactly cheap—“

“You never told me you were from out of town,” said Sam, stepping forward with a frown. “I met you in upstate New York.” Sam glanced to Tony. “JARVIS told me he was trying to break into an old SI facility and asked me to check it out. You heard about that, right?”

“There was no trying,” Lang scoffed. “I did break in.”

“I don’t think that’s going to win you any brownie points,” Strange commented, also looking to Tony.

Lang followed his gaze, and audibly gulped.

“So,” said Tony, crossing his arms. “You’re Ant-Man.”

“Yes,” said Lang. “And you’re Iron Man.”

Tony arched a brow, and Lang winced.

“I am terribly sorry, Sir,” said JARVIS. “I detected his presence, and but I had hoped that I could alert Captain Rogers after you had left so as not to distract you.”

“It’s all right, J, you did your best,” Tony said, not removing his gaze from Lang.

“How did you even get in here?” Clint asked, crossing his arms and glaring at Lang. “I have had personal experience with trying to get around JARVIS, and he even has the vents on lockdown these days.”

Lang shrugged, and pointed to the right. “Your window was open.”

All eyes followed his gesture to where, yes, one of the windows that was almost a thousand feet up was open just a crack, just enough to let in a bit of fresh air– and, apparently, an insect-sized human.

Strange walked over and closed it immediately– which was a bit hypocritical, Tony thought, considering all the times that Strange had turned up unannounced.

“Oh,” said Clint. “So. You can fly, I guess? Or do you climb walls like Spider-Man?”

“Neither,” said Lang, grinning. And Tony was interested, sure, but he also had far more important things to be doing, so he decided to cut right to the chase.

“I thought Pym said he wasn’t going to let you come?” He said, narrowing his eyes.

“He’s not the boss of me,” Lang said loftily. Then he winced again. “Yeah, okay, so maybe I snuck away with the suit. He’s probably not going to be all that happy, but with everything that’s going on, I mean. The world’s on the line, right? I saw those aliens yesterday.”

“Very astute,” said Tony. Then he glanced to Sam. “Can you get rid of this guy? Surely Steve can deal with this.”

“Come on, TicTac,” said Sam, gesturing for Lang to follow him out of the room. “Let’s leave the big
leagues to go on their suicidal mission in peace.”

Lang pouted and looked like he wanted to stay for longer, but like hell Tony was going to waste time on Ant-Man when there was a chance that Loki could be going up against Thanos right now. So he turned away from the sight and focused on his gauntlet, checking that it was still in just as good a nick as it was before. Clint went as well, asking Lang about his ant-related powers in a loud voice as they entered the elevator.

“Aw,” said Quill, grinning fondly. “He called me a big league. I like that guy.”

“Well, you’ll have plenty of time to talk to him when we get back,” said Strange. “He’d better be wrong, Stark. This had better not be a suicide mission.”

“If it is, you’ll bring us back, right?” said Tony, looking up from his gauntlet and flashing Strange a grin just as his helmet formed back into place over his head. “Now, hold on to me, guys. No more interruptions.”

The first time, Quill had made a snarky comment about holding hands, but Tony had snapped at him with enough bite for him to back off. This time, Quill merely moved closer and placed his hand tightly on Tony’s left shoulder, with Strange doing the same on the other side.

Then Tony closed his eyes, and he focused.

Just like the last time, it wasn’t difficult. Tony could bring an image of Loki into his mind’s eye with barely a thought, taking care to bring life to the smallest of details. He pictured the way that Loki’s green eyes would spark at a well executed prank, and the small crease that would form on his brow when Tony referenced something that Loki didn’t understand. Tony could almost taste Loki on the tip of his tongue, could feel the cool pressure of Loki’s fingers pressing against his skin. He imagined the exact cadence of Loki’s laugh and the small quirk to the corner of Loki’s mouth when he was reluctantly amused but equally exasperated, and Tony fell even deeper into the remembered sensation of Loki than he had before.

There was something different to the way that the Space Stone accepted Tony’s attempts to direct the portal. Before, it had always felt a little forced—Tony had wanted to go somewhere and told the Stone of his intentions, and the Stone had merely complied. But this time—Tony could feel the blue tendrils of power curling through his very being, not only understanding but guiding, helping Tony’s fingers form the portal in a way that it never had before.

Not quite sentient, Loki had said, yet able to understand desire. Tony didn’t think that he had truly believed it until that moment, when he felt that the Space Stone wished to go to Loki almost as much as he did. But he knew that his pleading request for a destination was being not only listened to but taken to heart, and for the first time, Tony knew with complete certainty that the portal would take him exactly where he needed to go.

He heard Strange gasp and Quill mutter out an expletive but it was like he was hearing them from underwater, the Space Stone and his image of Loki filling every ounce of conscious thought that Tony had to spare. When his eyes finally snapped open there was a glowing blue portal in the space before him, not clear cut like Strange’s were but almost blurred around the edges, like it wasn’t tearing a hole in space but rather simply bringing together two places that were leagues apart.

Rather than moving forward, Tony twisted his wrist and curled his fingers, causing the portal to begin to move toward them. He felt his companions tense but paid them no notice, keeping his eyes wide and alert as all three of them were engulfed in the power of the Stone.
The transition was seamless and comfortable, nothing like the crash landing he had experienced in his attempted and failed trip to Chicago. The portal simply washed over them and the living room of Avengers Tower shifted into the dark corridors of a ship. The Stone must have accounted for everything— it must have ensured that the other side was at the right height for their feet to be on the ground, it must have accounted for the velocity of their landing ground (because Tony hadn’t even considered that maybe Thanos would be on a ship and not a planet) and it must have made sure that Strange’s worry didn’t come to pass and that they didn’t end up half way through a wall. There was an uncountable score of things that could have gone wrong but didn’t— because all Tony had thought about was being brought to Loki, and the Space Stone took care of all the rest.

It truly was more powerful than Tony had realised.

Except, perhaps, for the fact that they were alone in the corridor, without another soul in sight.

Tony frowned. Sure, maybe it was good that they hadn’t run into any guards, but there was no telling how big this place was. How were they supposed to find Loki?

He was just about to ask JARVIS to do a scan when something grabbed his armour from behind. Tony growled and spun and pushed forward with both hands, shoving away the invisible force and using his boot repulsors to power backwards. He didn’t want to fire when he couldn’t see what he was firing at—

But Strange didn’t appear to have that problem, as he formed a whip made of pure energy with his hands and threw it out across the corridor. The whip caught on something, slamming it against the wall– and Strange tensed, clearly readying himself for a fight—

“Let go of me you fool,” Loki hissed as he appeared in a shimmer of green, though the words were unnecessary as Strange released him almost in the same moment.

Tony's helmet folded away unconsciously, letting him see with his own eyes. “Loki?” he asked, incredulous at first before his voice slipped into a growl and— “Loki—“

“Yes, yes,” said Loki, pushing away from the wall and brushing down his coat. Tony noticed that despite having taken the sceptre and his armour from the penthouse, Loki had neither on him– he was wearing his dark leather coat that was lined with green, the only metal on him a tarnished silver gorget below his collar. He was clearly dressed for stealth, and the fact slowed Tony’s racing heart a little. “I’m here. Now, please, quiet.”

“Good,” said Strange. “We found Loki. Can we go home, now?”

“No,” Quill snapped before Tony could say a thing. “Not until I’ve had a look around.”

“And not until I have done what I came here for,” Loki added. “I need to find Thanos, and while he does not appear to be on the ship at the moment, I am certain that he shall not be long.”

“No, you need to explain yourself,” Tony cut in, finally finding his voice again. “You can’t just leave like that, without saying goodbye, without tell me that you’re planning on—“

He was cut off when Loki reached out and placed a hand over his mouth, silencing him immediately. Tony tried to speak around his hand but Loki brought his attention to the end of the corridor, where a familiar figure was walking by. They probably had Loki’s magic to thank for not being noticed.

Tony couldn’t help the shudder. He knew Loki had told him years ago that he hadn’t killed them all, but abstract knowledge was entirely different to seeing them still walking around with his own eyes.
Loki pulled Tony into a nearby door, and the others followed. The room they found themselves in was small, dark, and dank, with a pot in the corner and no knob on the door. It was clearly a cell, and Tony did his best not to be disconcerted by that fact.

“What the hell were they?” Quill asked as they shut the door firmly.

“They’re the ones who attacked New York,” said Strange, keeping his voice low. “I recognise them from the news.”

“Chitauri,” Loki growled. “They are the guards upon this ship, and they will kill you without a thought. So perhaps the next time you plan to barge in unannounced to ruin my plan, you will think ahead first!”

“Oh, so we were the ones not thinking?” Tony said, stepping away from Loki and removing his helmet with a non-verbal direction to JARVIS. “Remind me, who was it that ran off to face Thanos without backup?”

“I do not need back up,” Loki replied. “I am—“

“If you end that sentence with ‘I am a god’, I’m going to smack you,” Tony snapped.

Loki glared. “I am perfectly capable of looking after myself,” he hissed. “And I am not here to ‘face’ Thanos.”

“Oh?” Tony asked. “Then why are you here? Tea and biscuits?”

“I did not want you involved,” Loki said. “I did not want you getting hurt.”

“Well,” Tony replied, not quite able to hold Loki’s gaze. “That goes both ways, sweetheart.”

“This is kind of awkward,” said Quill, and without even looking Loki thrust a glowing green hand in his and Strange’s direction. Tony guessed that he’d probably blocked out sound or something, but he didn’t bother to check.

“Look,” Tony said, stepping into Loki’s space and tilting up his chin to force himself to look him in the eye. “This isn’t the time or the place, and I don’t want to argue with you, anyway. But we’ve been through this, Loki. You can’t just leave.”

“I did not think that you would notice,” Loki admitted, and when he reached out to curl a hand around Tony’s wrist, Tony let him.

Tony frowned. “You—“

“I see now that I was misguided,” Loki continued. “But you should have trusted that I would not be doing something unnecessarily risky.”

“I do trust you,” Tony replied. “You know that. But that doesn’t mean that you can just—“

“There is no risk here,” Loki said. His words were firm but his hand remained on Tony’s wrist, and even though he couldn’t feel it through the armour, it was comforting. “I promise. I was not planning on confronting Thanos, I am not acting out of rage or thirst for vengeance. I have thought this through, and if all goes to plan, Thanos will not even know that I was here. It was safer to come alone, as more people would attract more attention.”

Loki’s expression was so earnest, so open, and Tony knew that he was not lying. Tony found that he
was a little worried that their previous discussions had not fully sunk in, that Loki still believed acting on his own was the best option—though it was clear that Loki had at least considered teamwork this time.

Also...

“You didn’t seem too surprised to see us here,” Tony commented.

Loki sighed. “I suppose I should reword my earlier statement,” he said. “I had hoped that you would not notice, but I knew that there is little that escapes you. I have been half expecting you to show up since I arrived.”

“So why didn’t you just tell me?” Tony asked, almost incredulous. “If you thought I would find out anyway—”

“You are the most precious thing to me,” Loki said, his hand releasing Tony’s wrist and cupping his cheek instead. “Any chance of keeping you safe... I would take it.”

Tony couldn’t help but soften. “You know that’s not an option any more,” he said. “You’ve got to let the little clownfish have his own adventure.”

Loki frowned, tilting his head. “You are the clownfish?”

“Never mind,” Tony said. “Just another thing to add to your ‘to watch’ list. But the point is— you need to stop stopping me from doing things, okay?”

“And you need to stop coming after me,” Loki stressed, all traces of confusion vanishing as quickly as they had appeared. “You said this goes both ways, so prove it. Allow me to fight Thanos as I see fit.”

“You’re part of a team, now,” Tony shot back. “We both are. You need to communicate.”

Loki looked away, and Tony decided to take the lack of denial or argument as definite progress. He also couldn’t help but notice that Loki hadn’t once asked Tony to leave—probably he had finally understood that it wasn’t going to work. Tony didn’t comment on either, though.

“So what is this plan of yours, then?” he asked instead.

“I would rather tell everyone at once,” Loki said, catching his gaze once again. “We are in a precarious position, after all. I would rather not waste time.”

“All right,” said Tony. “Okay. This isn’t done, but we need to focus.” He paused, recognising the look in Loki’s eye at the words. It was stubborn but self-deprecating—Loki wasn’t going to give up his point regarding protecting Tony, and he was kicking himself over that fact. So Tony leaned forward, glad that the armour made up the difference in their height, and pressed a kiss to Loki’s cheek. It was quick and fleeting, lasting only half a moment, but when he pulled back the change in Loki’s expression was clearly evident.

Loki still wasn’t going to apologise, and neither was Tony. But they were all right.

Well. As all right as they could be considering their current location—a fact that their companions were only too happy to point out when Loki lowered the spell he had cast minutes before.

“If you’re done having a lovers’ spat in the middle of enemy territory, can we now come up with a plan?” Strange griped.
“I don’t even know why you came here in the first place,” Quill said, not-quite glaring in Loki’s direction. “Are you sure you’re not still on Thanos’ side?”

“Quite sure,” Loki replied dryly. “If I were, I would have picked a moment when he were actually on board to visit his ship.”

“Do you have a plan?” asked Strange. “Because the last time we faced him, there were a lot more of us, and he still won.”

“Only barely,” said Quill.

A slight tightness in Loki’s jaw was the only indication that he had picked up on the reminder of exactly what Thanos had done to barely win, and when he spoke it was with his usual smooth confidence.

“We have an advantage this time,” he said. “To begin with, I was never intending to alert Thanos to my presence– something that, despite you barging in, I believe that we will still be able to achieve.”

“And if he does realise we’re here?” asked Tony.

“He can only use one of the Stones,” said Loki, his green eyes flashing. “That would have put me on even footing with him, but now with you here, we will outmatch him by far.”

“He has two Stones, though,” Strange pointed out, frowning. Then, without prompting, his expression cleared. “Oh.”

“Thank you, Hulk,” Tony said.

“He won’t be able to control them as well, either,” said Quill, and when Tony looked to him in surprise, he shrugged. “I’ve felt that thing, don’t forget. It’s insane, and it would tear any normal person apart.”

“He’s right,” Loki admitted almost grudgingly. “I myself had trouble with the Mind Stone, before Eitri crafted this sceptre for me. Thanos will be more powerful, but less rational, and we will be able to use that. I know Thanos. He will likely use the Power Stone, for even though the Reality Stone is far more useful, he will not be able to resist the allure of such a force.”

“Why would the Reality Stone be more useful?” Quill asked, almost disbelieving. “I’ve seen the Power Stone in action– and yeah, Thanos can make things look different with the red one, but the purple has enough power to destroy an entire planet.”

“Oh, it has far more than that,” Loki said, causing Quill’s eyes to widen. “But likewise, the Reality Stone does more than simply shift a person’s perception of what is in front of him. Only a fool would trade the ability to manipulate the very fabric reality for mere power.”

“Are you calling Thanos a fool?” Strange asked incredulously.

Loki’s lips curled in a shark like grin. “He is intelligent,” he said. “But he is also arrogant. He does not see the potential in subtlety, and that is why we shall win this day. For I have the Mind Stone, and I have full intention to use it in a manner that is both subtle and incredibly effective.”

“And you say he’s arrogant?” Quill muttered.

Loki’s grin merely widened.
When Loki explained what he had come to do, Tony’s only response was tilt his head and say—

“You want to *Inception* him?”

Loki blinked in confusion. And oh yeah, Tony hadn’t quite got up to showing Loki that movie yet, either. If he was being honest, he might have been a little worried that it would give the infamous trickster some rather terrifying ideas.

It seemed that wasn’t something that Tony needed to be worried about though, since Loki was already all over the concept of planting an idea into someone else’s mind.

“Are you sure that luring Thanos back to Earth is the best idea?” Strange asked, ignoring Tony’s comment.

“I definitely don’t think it is,” said Quill. “Surely if you can make him think whatever you want, you should be sending him as far away as possible?”

“Yesterday, the humans were organised before the Outriders landed in the park,” Loki said. Then he glanced to Tony, raising his brows in silent communication.

Tony frowned, and shook his head.

“Banner said they spoke with the last member of the Black Order,” Loki prompted, and when Tony still didn’t catch on he sighed and looked to Strange.

“Romanov spoke with Midnight,” Strange confirmed. “Apparently she boasted that even if we brought together all of our military forces Thanos would still be able to overpower us, that he had nothing to fear. Romanov and Rhodes believed that it was more than just a boast, that it revealed Thanos’ arrogance.”

“And that if they did gather a considerable force, Thanos would pick up the gauntlet,” Loki finished. “No doubt they decided they would take the opportunity to control the fight.”

“They didn’t have the time to congregate anywhere other than the city,” Strange confirmed. “And they believed that Thanos would likely attack there anyway, as that was where he knew Infinity Stones to be located. So we gathered around Central Park, as that was the most defendable spot on the island.” The corners of his lips turned up a little, his expression brightening with a spark of what could only be pride. “Thanos took the bait immediately.”

“The humans would not have been able to contain the Outriders half so well if they had not chosen the field of battle themselves,” Loki said, and Tony already knew that fact was undisputable. Sure, a few of the bloody things had managed to slip past the perimeter, but if they hadn’t had snipers on the roofs and been able to funnel the army through the roads, the Outriders could have scattered and they’d be finding them terrorising the state for weeks. The body count would have been astronomical.

“So you want to do that again,” Tony summarised. “You’re not just going to convince Thanos that he needs to go back to Earth, you want to send him to a certain spot.”

“Not New York,” Loki confirmed. “There are too many people. If Thanos follows an idea that I place inside his mind, I can give us more time. The landscape will not matter so much if we have more time to prepare.”
“Where are you thinking of aiming him?” Strange asked.

“There is a place east of Malibu that is largely free from human life,” said Loki. “Of most life, actually. Less chance of casualties. Is that not what an Avenger is supposed to consider?”

“You’re talking about Nevada,” Tony realised.

“Surely somewhere in Alaska would be better,” said Strange. “There’s plenty of uninhabited space up there, and mountains that we could use as a natural barrier—“

“You saw those things, Strange, no mountain is going to stop them,” said Tony. “Loki’s right, the desert will work better. They won’t be able to hide, and we can have some aircraft patrolling the edges of the fight to keep them from getting too far if we miss any.”

Loki nodded. “The desert then,” he said. “When?”

Tony didn’t need to look to the others to know the answer. “Give us as much time as you can.”

There was a low rumble through the ship, a noise and an accompanying vibration that had them all shutting up– for even Tony could guess what it meant.

“Something is docking,” said Loki, his eyes flicking to the door. “All the Black Order are either dead or imprisoned. It must be Thanos.”

“Well good, I’m sick of all this chatting,” said Quill, pulling his weapon from its holster. “I’m ready for some action.”

“Remember, we’re being quiet,” Tony reminded him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Quill replied, rolling his eyes. “But we all know that a plan which involves being quiet always fails the moment someone knocks over something metallic. Or steps on a stick.”

“There are no sticks here,” said Strange.

“But Stark’s in a metal suit, he’s not going to be very quiet,” Quill pointed out. “So this plan sucks, by the way, and I’m only following it because it’ll get us closer to that purple dick.”

Tony had a temporary moment of panic when they went to leave the cell, for as he had noticed before it wasn’t possible to open it from the inside. But Loki managed it with a simple push of magic, and then they were out– though Tony couldn’t help but imagine that the saying had never quite been so relevant.

“Come on,” said Loki, leading the way into the hall, his hands empty of weapons but moving with a lithe grace that made him look just as deadly without them. Tony stayed in close behind him, and the others brought up the rear.

The Chitauri from before thankfully seemed to have moved on, and the corridor was clear as they began to move along it. Tony noted that it seemed to be the prison area of the ship, as all the doors were heavy and had a food flap at the bottom, as well as a sliding viewing slot near the top. Despite Quill’s worries they managed to remain silent– but they quickly became aware that they were still not alone on the ship.

As they passed another cell, they heard a scream– a horrible, bloodcurdling scream that cut off almost as quickly as it had started.
“Thanos already has what he wants!” a woman yelled from behind the door, her voice tinny, almost robotic, yet the anguish was as human as any. “Let me go!”

There was a horrible hissing and clicking that made the hairs on the back of Tony’s neck stand up, and recognised the sound as Chitauri. Then there was another scream.

“I know that voice,” said Quill, moving toward the door.

“Gamora?” asked Tony, though even before Quill shook his head, he knew what the answer would be. If it were, Quill would have long since barged in.

Tony charged up his repulsors, and Strange summoned two of his trademark orange shields. Loki twisted his hands and pulled his sceptre from thin air, taking up his position beside Tony.

“Ready?” Quill checked.

Loki flickered out of existence in response, and Tony immediately blew in the door with his repulsors, opening the way for the rest of the motley crew. They entered in time to see Loki pull his sceptre out of one of the Chitauri in the room, and Tony’s repulsor caught the second, dropping it to the ground. A simple scan revealed that there were no more Chitauri in the cell, and he turned his attention to the final occupant instead.

She was like nothing Tony had ever seen before, with no hair and blue skin, clearly augmented with some kind of cybernetic technology and wearing clothes that were of a similar material and colour to Quill’s jacket. She was suspended in the air, belly-down similar to the position Tony had been held in by Ebony Maw, though there were no shards to implement her torture. They were not needed.

The woman was… in pieces. Every piece of her looked like it had been carefully pried from the whole, like she had been surgically dissected and arranged to display the cross section. Tony could see all the inner workings of her body, could spy how she was almost more machine than flesh and bone. He could see every organ and every metallic shard, every single tendon and gear, and he couldn’t imagine the kind of pain that must have been inflicted upon her.

And she was still alive.

Her black eyes darted between the newcomers, breathing heavily as she frantically seemed to search for something. Her gaze came to rest on Quill, but the Guardian appeared frozen in place.

Tony was fascinated. He wanted to examine how she was put together, how the cybernetic parts had been fused to her organic body, but she was in pain. She had clearly been tortured, and even though he knew nothing about her, Tony would be damned if he would allow her to remain that way for long.

There didn’t appear to be anything visible holding her in place, and Tony couldn’t see any kind of control panel that might have offered information. So he turned to Loki, a question falling from his lips.

“I can dull her pain,” Loki muttered in response, “but I cannot piece her back together. The force holding her, I think, has come from the Power Stone, so my seiðr cannot match it. But you have the Space Stone, Anthony. You can help her.”

“I can’t,” Tony said immediately, shaking his head. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“You can,” Loki said firmly. “And I will help you.”
Tony wasn’t sure what Loki meant by that, but he hadn’t lied earlier. He trusted his partner, certainly enough to try.

When Loki indicated that he wanted to initiate some contact, Tony reluctantly stowed away his armour. He felt naked and vulnerable without it, but he knew that the others would keep watch, and when Loki slid a hand under the material of Tony’s shirt to rest on the bare skin of his shoulder, Tony felt a surge of confidence flow through him.

Knowing that this wasn’t going to be something he could take lightly, Tony closed his eyes and focused in on the warm power at his chest. Loki was there, a steady presence by his side. Tony could feel him more than just by the hand on his shoulder— he could feel Loki all around him, could feel Loki’s power surging through his body in a way that he never quite had before.

Tony’s lips pulled apart in a soft gasp, and when Loki squeezed his shoulder he felt the sensation with everything he had, deep in his bones and right down to the tips of his toes.

*Stay strong*, he felt Loki say, the words seeping through him with calming purpose. *I’m here.*

And Tony knew in that moment that he would be able to do exactly what he needed to.

His eyes snapped open and he raised a hand, willing the woman’s body to be pieced back together. He knew without asking that Loki had already blocked her pain with the Mind Stone, that he could act now without worry. The torn shards of her body glowed a soft blue, and then slowly, ever so carefully slowly— *like all the king's horses and all the king's men*—Tony began to put her back together again.

It was difficult, as her body had suffered more than simply being pulled apart—pieces of her were broken and twisted, and despite his surge of confidence that he was *sure* had something to do with Loki and the way he could feel Loki guiding him, helping him in his movements, he knew that this wouldn’t be a perfect fix.

Just like in the nursery rhyme, his worries were proven when he lowered her gently to the ground and removed his influence. Tony clearly hadn’t managed to heal her perfectly. Some of her limbs were lumpy and misshapen, and several of her joints were definitely twisted around the wrong way. But she was all in one piece, and even as Tony watched she took hold of her bent-backwards foot and twisted it into the correct position, the sound prickling goose-bumps all over Tony’s skin.

The moment Loki moved away from Tony, the Iron Man armour spread out from the reactor and encased his body once more. Loki’s sceptre vanished in the same moment, and Tony realised that he must have stopped blocking the woman’s pain at the same time that Tony had released her. She was on her own, now.

She moved like a wild animal that had been caged for far too long, her every sound a broken snarl and her shattered limbs curling inward, prepared for either a flight or a fight to the death. Her eyes were wide with fear and hatred and were a pitch, pitch black, and she stared at them all without a hint of gratitude as she pressed herself against the wall.

“Nebula,” said Quill, finally finding his voice but not taking a single step closer. “Do you know who I am?”

“Quill,” Nebula spat. Her voice had the same metallic quality to it that Tony had heard before, but the venom in her words was still clearly audible. Despite it obviously paining her to speak, she continued to snarl. “You were supposed to look after her!”
Quill’s straight posture faltered. “What?” he whispered. Then, harshly, he asked— “You’ve seen Gamora?”

“She was here not long ago,” Nebula snapped. “I don’t know how long, Thanos had her.” She ignored Quill’s whine, and her black gaze turned to the others in her cell. “Well, well,” she said, pausing on Loki. “Look what the f’saki dragged in. Have you finally decided to stop running, Asgardian?”

“Something like that,” Loki told her. “And I suppose you finally snapped? Not looking for Daddy’s approval any more?”

“Thanos is a monster,” Nebula spat. She grasped her shoulder and shoved, popping it back into the joint with hardly a flinch.

“We aren’t disputing that,” said Tony, swallowing back the wince. “Are you going to be able to move past whatever you have against Loki?”

Nebula bared her teeth, and the movement looked just as painful as any other that she made. “All I care about is whether or not you’re here to put Thanos in the ground. If you aren’t, then you’d best stay out of my way.”

“We’re on the same side,” said Quill. “You’ll help us, right?”

“We need to get to Thanos,” said Strange. “As soon as possible. We have an idea of how to stop him.”

Nebula didn’t hesitate for a moment. “I know where he will be,” she said, her voice dripping with hatred as she clicked her final joint back into place with a disconcerting snap. “Follow me.”

Tony was a little apprehensive, but Loki seemed willing to follow the madwoman through Thanos’ warship. She was rather standoffish, Tony thought, considering they had just saved her. Sure, he hadn’t expected her to be friendly, since she had been tortured literally minutes before— she had no time to process, no time to think about what had happened and no time to even begin to heal.

But she didn’t have to be quite so ungrateful. They hadn’t even been given a thank you.

“You know,” said Strange, sidling up beside Tony and breaking him from his musings. “You two make a damn good pair.”

It was clear that Strange was referring to Loki, but beyond that Tony struggled to see his point.

“I do know?” Tony said, unable to keep the question out of his tone.

Strange flashed a smile, but it only lasted a second before he was serious once more. “You do realise what you just did?”

“I believe that you’re about to tell me.”

“Between the two of you, you just managed to use two Infinity Stones at once.” Strange smirked when Tony’s eyes widened. “It was impressive. Also rather terrifying, since I believe there is little that could have stopped the two of you in the moment— but yes. Impressive. I do believe that Thanos will not know what has hit him.”

“Be quiet,” Nebula hissed, turning back just long enough to give them a stink eye. “Someone will hear us!”
“I have cast a spell that will keep us from being heard,” Loki told her. “I did not trust that Quill would remain silent.”

Nebula rolled her eyes over Quill’s disgruntled “Hey!”

“And I do not trust you,” she said. “I would prefer we remain silent. I do not wish to be caught once again– something I am sure that you can understand.”

Loki nodded stiffly, and so they continued to walk quietly. Still, the conversation had brought Tony’s attention back to his partner, and as they followed Nebula through the twisting maze that was Thanos’ spaceship, Tony couldn’t help but notice that Loki was incredibly tense.

Of course, they were in a rather high-stress situation, and if it were anyone else, Tony wouldn’t have been worried. But this wasn’t anyone else– this was Loki, and Tony knew that when he was preparing to walk into a battle, Loki’s posture was always loose and ready, like a predator prepared to strike with the reflexes of a snake in whichever direction became necessary. It wasn’t like Loki to be tense at such a time, and it had Tony frowning in concern.

“Hey, Reindeer Games,” Tony whispered, stepping next to Loki and sliding the nanotech away from his fingers just long enough to brush them against Loki’s hand in comfort. He didn’t know exactly what was worrying him, but considering where they were and what they had just witnessed, Tony was fairly certain that he could make a pretty good guess. “You’re all right,” he said, and then almost immediately winced, since he knew from experience that those words never helped anything.

So Tony tacked on a sentence that had generally helped him, when he went through a flashback.

“You’re not alone, this time,” he promised.

Loki’s jaw clenched. “Yes,” he muttered. “That is exactly what concerns me.”
Chapter Summary

“We’re hardly here to storm the gates of hell,” Strange said. “We’re not idiots.”

They found Thanos exactly where Nebula said they would, seated upon a giant ass stone throne and bossing around a couple of Chitauri. Tony wasn’t really surprised– it made sense that a creature like Thanos would have throne, something that made him feel like he could lord it over the rest of the universe.

Nebula had led them to an overhang, and they were able to look down at the scene with a minimal risk of being detected. That, though, was half the problem, because the perfect view of the huge throne room just gave them time to think on things that were probably best left out of mind.

Loki’s eyes were searching, his gaze shifting all across the open space with something close to desperation.

“The Other is dead,” said Nebula, and Loki flinched as his eyes snapped up to rest on her.

“What?” he asked.

“He’s dead.” She smirked almost maliciously. “Ronan had the Power Stone for a while, and the Other was speaking down to him. He snapped the Other’s neck.”

“The Kree?” Loki asked, his expression a mess of anger and relief. “He simply… so quickly?”

“It was better than he deserved,” Nebula agreed, “but nothing more than that. He is gone. You do not have to worry, Asgardian.”

“I wasn’t worried.” Loki looked away. “I simply wished to kill him myself.”

“I thought you weren’t here to fight,” Quill muttered, but Loki didn’t take the bait, and they all fell into silence once again, staring down at the creature who would destroy half of all life.

Tony shifted closer and pressed against Loki’s side, and even through the armour he felt the god relax a little at the touch. It didn’t matter that Tony was in his suit and Loki was wearing heavy leather– the simple comfort of closeness was calming enough. Loki may not have wanted Tony there, may have wanted to keep him out of the line of fire, but Tony knew that there was still a level of comfort to be drawn from the feeling of standing side by side, preparing to face down the danger together.

The spot Nebula had led them to was a good vantage point, but the throne room really was huge, and Thanos was a good few hundred yards away. Loki silently gestured that they would need to move closer, something that made Tony balk, but– they had come this far, and they had a real chance here to get a leg up in the fight for the whole of creation. They couldn’t just walk away.

“We’re probably going to need a distraction,” said Quill, gaze already searching for a way to get within striking distance. “If we’re going to get in close, we’re going to need—“
“Nothing,” said Loki. “The Chitauri might need to be dealt with, but allow me to take care of Thanos.”

“What is your plan?” asked Nebula. “There are only two guards down there, I could take them easily, if they’re too much for you.”

“It would be better if Thanos is not aware that we’re here at all,” Loki snapped in reply.

They left their overhang silently, and Nebula led them through another hall, down a flight of stairs and around to the back of the room. There were not many guards at all—it would seem that Thanos’ supply of Chitauri were either more diminished than they had thought, or were out doing other things. Tony knew exactly which option he hoped was the truth.

“All right,” Loki said quietly, gripping his sceptre and crouching down in the small corridor Nebula led them to. It opened up to the throne room, just behind the titan himself. “The Mind Stone will take much of my concentration, and I will be unlikely to hold the illusion for long.” His gaze lingered on Tony, his expression pained, before he looked back to Strange. “Can you hold it?”

Strange shook his head. “Illusions aren’t my forte,” he said. “I can create something that is not there, but—”

“Hiding something real is far more difficult,” Loki said dismissively, clearly unsurprised that the skill was beyond Strange’s grasp.

The sorcerer scowled and crossed his arms. It probably wasn’t the right moment to be amused, but Tony couldn’t help it. He could, however, keep down his smirk, but the thought wouldn’t leave him. He wished that Loki and Strange could have met in calmer circumstances than they had, though he wouldn’t be surprised if Loki did something dramatic later to assert his superiority over the other magic user.

If, that is, they made it out of this alive.

Mood sufficiently ruined, Tony focused back in on the conversation.

“I will make sure that Thanos goes back to Midgard, as we agreed,” Loki was saying. “You need to make sure that I live long enough to do so.”

“How?” Nebula asked, spreading her empty hands.

Loki twisted his fingers through the air, pulling from it one of his daggers. He handed it to Nebula without a word.

“I don’t like this plan,” Quill muttered, and Tony agreed wholeheartedly. He also took note of the fact that Loki was admitting to needing help, but again decided that it probably wasn’t the moment to comment. Eyes on the prize, and all that.

Oh, look. Tony was showing restraint where his words were concerned. Take that, Pepper.

“Your approval is of little consequence to me,” Loki said. “I am still going to do it.”

There was no more room for argument, and Loki gave Tony one last look before settling in and focusing his attention on his magic.

Unlike when Loki had used the Mind Stone in the past, his eyes remained green while the sceptre glowed yellow, tendrils of amber reaching out to the titan sitting on the stone throne. Tony held his
breath as they connected with Thanos, but the titan didn’t appear to flinch. Loki was good at what he did and he held to his earlier words—his work was subtle, and if all went well, Thanos would never even know what he had done.

But, of course, not all was going to go well, because there was something that they had all managed to forget.

“Oh, crap,” said Quill, drawing his weapon and aiming it at the pair of Chitauri who had turned to find the source of the magic. “Now what?”

“Please,” said Tony, raising his hands and charging his repulsors. “Allow me.”

Tony could honestly say that despite his history, he had never actually enjoyed violence. Oh, there was a certain rush that could be found in a fight, and he would never deny finding pleasure in certain justice, but the actual act of it? No. Yet killing Chitauri was something that Tony didn’t think he’d ever get enough of, and while he knew he wasn’t smiling the look of concern on Strange’s face let him know that there was something in his expression that he hadn’t meant to let slip. Still, Strange made use of a portal to dispose of the bodies, holding to Loki’s suggestion that they keep Thanos ignorant of their presence.

Nebula, meanwhile, wasn’t quite grinning, but there was a touch of enjoyment to her mechanical features that gave the impression of it.

“Well, well, human,” she said. “I didn’t think any of you soft creatures could be so cold.”

“Hey,” Quill complained. “I’m half human, and I am definitely less than half soft.”

Nebula raised her single remaining eyebrow, and smirked. If Quill caught the joke, she didn’t give him the time to comment on it. “Come on, then,” she said. “Prove it. The Asgardian has Thanos distracted, this is the best chance we will have.”

She moved to put her words into actions, but Quill caught her arm, stopping her.

“What?” she asked. “This is our best chance. Didn’t you come to stop him?”

“We’re hardly here to storm the gates of hell,” Strange said. “We’re not idiots.”

“Debateable,” Quill muttered.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, frowning. “Arranging to bring hell down on ourselves hardly seems any better, now that I think about it.”

Nebula’s smile vanished immediately. “I thought you said that you were going to end him,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “Or are you only here to play games?”

“We’re keeping a low profile,” Quill hissed back. “The Terrans and the Asgardian say they have a plan.”

“And what about Gamora? She doesn’t have the time for this.”

Quill paused. “Are you saying—“

“She told him the Soul Stone was on Vormir,” Nebula cut in, and although Tony didn’t know where or what that was, he could understand what it meant, and he turned to stare at Nebula in horror.

“You mean Thanos might have another Stone?”
“I mean that Gamora doesn’t have time,” Nebula snapped. “If Thanos is back here already… No. Gamora is his favourite.”

“We need to get over there,” said Quill, already moving. “He’s distracted, and he hasn’t heard us talking. We can take him.”

Tony exchanged a worried glance with Strange, before he looked down to Loki.

Loki hadn’t moved an inch. His eyes were still glowing that bright, bright green, his lips pressed together in perfect concentration while he stared unseeingly at the back of Thanos’ head. Tony didn’t want to leave him there– but Nebula and Quill were already creeping around the edge of the throne.

They had been right about one thing. There was no time.

The sorcerer seemed to understand immediately, and instead of following crouched down beside Loki. Then Strange raised his hands, and an orange shield appeared around the two.

“Go,” he snapped. “The risk is too high, you need to stop them. I’ll watch Loki.”

Tony didn’t wait to be told twice. It was still hard, leaving Loki there with Strange, but if Nebula and Quill did something to derail the plan then there was no point to their having come into the jaws of hell itself in the first place.

He was around the throne in a moment, and immediately grateful that Thanos remained out if it.

“Well,” said Nebula, Loki’s blade spinning in her hands as she considered Thanos almost hungrily. “I think I am going to enjoy this.”

Tony found himself somewhat captivated. He had never seen Thanos this close before, not without being in the heat of battle. The titan’s purple face was wide and the skin smooth, with wrinkles on his chin that gave him the impression of a permanent grimace. The skin around his eyes was also lined, but those appeared to be more the marks of stress and a hard life than something biological. Tony supposed that evil megalomania was a difficult career path. The eyes themselves were glowing with the yellow light of the Mind Stone, and Tony knew that they weren’t seeing a thing.

Stuck in a dream, maybe. Being fed the lie, the idea that Loki wanted to stick.

Harmless and unaware.

It was almost logical to kill him now.

Almost.

Except for the part where it wasn’t.

“Come on,” Tony whispered. “You know that if we pull Thanos from the hold that Loki has him in, we’re not getting out clean.”

“We could end it now,” Nebula said, half turning but keeping her focus on Thanos. She remained several feet away, far enough not to disturb, and her voice remained low. “End it, and there will be no need for a later battle.”

“Quill,” Tony tried, glancing to where the Guardian was standing behind Nebula, his own weapon drawn and aimed. “You know this isn’t going to work. You know it, and–“ Tony paused. He knew it was a low blow, but if everything was on the line– “Is this what Gamora would want?” he asked.
“You said she was willing to sacrifice herself. Would she want you to squander our plan?”

“You never even met her,” Quill said, his wrathful gaze remaining on Thanos. “You never—”

“No,” Tony said. “And maybe— maybe I never will. Maybe she is gone, and maybe it’s Thanos’ fault—”

“It is his fault,” Nebula snarled. “He’s the one who—”

“You said before that Gamora was his favourite,” Tony tried. “You said he wouldn’t—”

“A fantasy,” Nebula replied, and it was clear that now she had a shot at trying to kill her father she was unwilling to let go of anything that might dull the hate. “He would.”

“If she is alive, you’ll never find her without questioning Thanos first,” Tony said desperately. “To do that, you need to wake him up, and if you do that, we’ll lose.”

Nebula spat at Thanos before spinning angrily to face Tony. “So what do you plan to do, then?”

“We’re luring him somewhere we’ll have the advantage,” said Tony. “Where we know that we can win. If we kill him now— well, we won’t. He’ll wake up, and he’ll kill us. So we have to bring him back to where we have the higher ground.”

“Then you’ll take me with you,” Nebula told him. “If I can’t kill him now—”

“You can’t.”

“—then I will see him die later.” She turned on her heel and stalked back to the others.

Quill’s expression was twisted, but he went too, also taking the time to show Thanos just how well he was appreciated with a carefully aimed wad of saliva. Tony went to follow with a sigh of relief– a sigh of relief that, of course, came only a moment too soon, for no sooner than when Tony had crossed back behind the throne a Chitauri scrambled into the room, moving quickly and accompanied by screeches and wails as it tried to get Thanos’ attention.

And that, of course, was the moment Tony remembered they had left two dead guards on the ground in Nebula’s cell. Well, fuck.

Loki flinched, his eyes dimming as he came back to himself—

“What?” Thanos asked, and Tony couldn’t see the titan but he could see and hear the way that the Chitauri chattered warily in response. Then Thanos rose from his throne in one smooth movement, showing no indication that he was aware of what had just befallen him, but angry nonetheless.

“Nebula!” He growled, turning with his hands clenched tightly, staring about the room, searching. “I know that you’re here, stop hiding!”

“We need to go,” Tony said, grabbing Loki and pulling him upright.

“No,” said Loki, shaking himself and yanking his arm away. He was speaking at a normal level– hopefully he had them cloaked again. “I am not finished—”

“He knows we’re here—”

“He’s only looking for me.” Nebula’s eyes were trained on her father, angry and focused.

“I don’t care,” she said. She turned to Quill, her dark eyes conveying a thousand things that Tony was sure he was never going to be able interpret. “Make him pay,” she said. “Make sure you make him pay for everything that he’s done.”

She was gone before they had the chance to stop her, darting from between their fingers and running to the right, at least moving away from their hiding place before revealing herself with words that rang with hate.

“Hello, dad.”

The speed at which Thanos turned was almost comical, but the glint of purple in his left hand was anything but.

“Have you come to kill me, Nebula?” Thanos asked. He almost sounded sad.

“I’ve come to give you what you deserve,” she said, raising Loki’s dagger threateningly.

Thanos smiled.

“Well,” said Strange, “I say we respect her wish.”

“We can’t just leave her,” said Quill, shaking his head. “I won’t!”

It’s not that Tony didn’t agree – the thought of leaving an ally, even one like Nebula behind grated on his already flimsy morality like nothing else – but he also knew that if they stayed and Thanos managed to beat them, the situation would only get a whole lot worse.

But then Quill was darting out from the corridor, and then they didn’t have a choice.

The battle started the moment that Thanos realised his daughter hadn’t come alone. It was clear that he had thought Nebula had merely escaped her bonds and come to exact revenge, but as soon as he saw Quill he changed his tack, his eyes flaring purple with the influence of the Power Stone as he threw out a blast of pure energy that knocked them all backward.

Tony was first aware of Loki disappearing from his side, then of Strange using a portal to go as well. Tony’s faceplate slammed down in the same moment that he flew out into the main room, one thought running through his mind and cutting through the fear in an attempt to reassure his racing mind.

He can only use one of the Stones, Loki had said.

Unfortunately, though, it didn’t seem to put Thanos at too much of a disadvantage, as despite the fact that they were in the middle of space on Thanos’ own ship the titan did not appear disinclined to destroy it. He sent blasts after Tony without thought, and Tony winced when he saw one wall crack, hoping that it wasn’t weight bearing.

Still, Tony had learned from the last time. He knew to keep his distance, to stay high and wide and fire everything he had, dancing out of the way of those deadly blasts to come back and strike again.

Thanos growled and shouted and tried to swat him down but had less luck than a dog snapping at a fly– yet the metaphor worked both ways, because Tony really didn’t feel like he was doing any damage.

Nebula had been thrown aside early, cracking against the wall as her abused limbs snapped and twisted again. Her pain was obvious but she was back on her feet in moments. Quill went to help her
up but she pushed him away, and then they both ran forward, dagger flashing and gun firing. They were intercepted as a dozen or so Chitauri ran from the door, and Tony covered them from the air before they could be overwhelmed.

That left Thanos to the magic users. Strange twirled his arms to the side and then suddenly there were ten of him, utilising Loki’s favourite trick in an attempt to confuse. But Thanos wasn’t one to fall for such things, and Strange was forced to abandon the illusions to shield himself from the wave of purple that surged at him a moment later.

Thanos leapt forward with his fist drawn back in the midst of it, breaking through the orange barrier and landing a hard hit against Strange’s head. The shield took most of it but it was enough to knock him to the ground, and before any of the others could do a thing Thanos was raising Strange up into the air, his hand tightening around Strange’s throat. The red cloak flapped and struggled but it was anchored down by a web of purple, its distress clear as it was unable to help.

Strange dangled from Thanos’ purple fist, the whites of his eyes burning pink and his lips turning blue as ugly, silent gasps fell from his gaping mouth. The fingers of Thanos’ other hand curled around the amulet and tore it from Strange’s neck, the leather snapping with a sickening jerk.

Tony froze in mid-air. He couldn’t fire, he would risk hitting Strange, and he half doubted that it even would do anything if he did manage to hit his target. The Eye of Agamotto swung in Thanos’ grasp like it was taunting him, and Tony could do nothing.

Then Loki appeared in the middle of the chaos and slammed the end of his sceptre against the ground. The air exploded with yellow, the power flowing outward in a shockwave that pushed through Tony and the others harmlessly but sent Thanos careening back like no other hit had. Thanos screamed, and threw Strange to the side as he brought up his hands in an attempt to shield himself. An explosion of purple flew forward to meet the yellow and Loki didn’t move, too focused on the Mind Stone—

But Tony was there, landing in front of Loki with a nanotech shield at the ready, bracing himself against the onslaught. His metal boots screeched as they dragged across the ground and his shoulders ached but he managed to hold strong, buying Loki time.

Quill and the cloak worked together with a combination of jet boots and aerial acrobatics to slow the sorcerer enough to avoid breaking anything important, but there was still a nasty crack when Strange hit the floor. The four remaining Chitauri immediately ran forward, and Nebula was on them like a demon.

Then the blast from the Power Stone let up, and Tony glanced over his shield to see that Thanos had his hands pressed against his temples. The ‘Time Stone was dangling from the leather strap, held between Thanos’ fingers as he clawed at his skull, trying to tear Loki from his mind.

Loki’s face twisted with determined fury, and the sceptre flashed brighter as he held his ground. Thanos was fighting, but Loki wasn’t going to let him go.

Tony had no doubt that Loki was going to accomplish what he had come to do, but there was little chance of them holding the fight once it was done. Thanos would tear straight through them.

“Quill!” Tony yelled, and the Guardian looked across immediately. “We need to go!”

There was no moment of misunderstanding— Quill immediately turned to Nebula, gesturing wildly for her to move closer to the group even as he moved toward Strange.
Tony didn’t hear the words but he knew that Loki had said them. When he turned to look he saw that Loki hadn’t moved, his eyes still on Thanos.

Not yet, Loki said again. I almost have it.

I know, Tony thought, and he didn’t know whether Loki heard or not, but he knew that Loki would understand regardless.

So Tony remained in front of Loki, his shield at the ready, waiting just in case for the moment when Thanos regained his senses. He did hope that Loki would come to first, that they would have a moment to escape before Thanos woke. But of course, the Space Stone was not the only one of the six that required focus to be used, and Thanos’ came back to himself with a snarl in the same moment as Loki. A wave of energy from the Power Stone began to tear through the room and Tony ducked behind his shield, holding it high, but it was unnecessary as a blast of green seiðr flashed past him to knock Thanos down once again.

And Loki’s voice rang through his head.

Now.

When the moment came Tony had been hoping that Loki would be able to hold Thanos as he had in Central Park, but it seemed that Loki had done all he could with the Mind Stone. Perhaps he didn’t want to draw more attention to what he had done, but he only used his own magic as he ran past Tony’s shield to take his turn at buying time.

That was more worrying than comforting, because Tony wasn’t sure that he’d be able to do it. The noise and the action and the fear coursing through him meant that it was difficult to focus, and he couldn’t bring a clear image of Avengers Tower to mind. Still, he tried, picturing the bright blue A – but that was on the outside – the comfortable couch in the Avengers’ living room – but that wasn’t even there. He tried to remember the details of the penthouse living room, the couch he had found Peter on and the coffee table that probably still held Loki’s mug. He had a bit more success with that —

Energy flared hot against his chest, and Tony attempted to grapple for the same level of control that he had managed before. The Stone struggled, though, refusing to cooperate, and Tony remembered that last time he’d had to merely focus on what he wanted and allow the Stone to do the rest. So he turned his attentions and instead simply tied to focus on where he wanted to go.

Before, he’d managed it because he’d wanted nothing more in the world than to be at Loki’s side. This time Loki was right beside him, and with all the distractions of the fight– well. There was one thing he knew he could focus on.

Safe, Tony thought desperately, digging into the power of the Space Stone and clinging to that one thing. I need to get us somewhere safe.

Somehow, the heat at his chest dimmed to a steady burn, though it felt no less powerful.

Tony fought hard to hold on to the feeling of safe, of home. If nothing else in that moment, he knew that he just wanted to go home, to be able to get away from the danger and the fear and to just hold Loki and feel like they had all the time in the world.

There was a bright flare of blue, Tony yelled for the others and dived for Loki amongst the blasts of magic. Nebula was there immediately, with Quill helping a thankfully conscious Strange close
behind her, and then—

With Thanos’ parting yell rattling through the portal behind them—

They didn’t arrive in the Tower, but they were on Earth. Malibu, to be exact, and standing in the middle of Tony’s workshop. The place was disconcertingly quiet, as the bots had been moved to New York months ago, but it was still home. Still safe. And Tony felt his whole body sag with relief, only his suit and the steady hands on his shoulders keeping him upright.

“Welcome home,” said JARVIS, sounding horribly relieved.

Despite his exhaustion and obvious pain, Strange didn’t wait to be asked. An orange portal was burning near the workbench in moments and then they were all happily stumbling through, into the familiar common floor of Avengers Tower, bright with the midday sun streaming in through the windows.

Steve was on an armchair beside the space where the couch once stood, and he jerked to his feet as they arrived through the portal, stumbling and falling in exhaustion and utter relief. Tony was shocked to see Barnes in the kitchen but glad that he remained where he was, not coming any closer even as he watched the proceedings curiously. Thor was there too— he dropped the snack he was making to the counter as he strode toward them purposefully.

One member of their party was not content to wait for greetings.

“What did you do that?” Nebula snarled, her teeth bared and her eyes burning with anguish, stopping Thor in his tracks as she snapped at Quill. “What did you—"

“You think I could leave you to die?” Quill asked, his voice rising to a shout. “Really? Do you think I could—“ He broke himself off, but he didn’t need to complete the sentence for Nebula to understand.

“You didn’t do this for me,” she snapped. “I’m not blind.”

“I dislike you,” Quill said. “But Gamora would not want you dead—“

“You think that you were honouring her, but you may as well have spat on her bones,” Nebula said. “How dare you say her name?”

Quill didn’t bother to answer. He stared at her inscrutably for a moment, before walking straight toward the elevator and asking JARVIS to take him to Thor’s floor, his shoulders tense.

Nebula snarled and snapped her teeth as she turned, stalking to the wall and slamming her hand against it.

“I’ve got another one for Ross,” Tony said weakly to Steve in the following quiet, gesturing at Nebula. “She’s definitely on our side.”

“I believe you,” Steve said weakly. “You’ve made it back, that’s all the matters.”

“And that you are safe,” said Thor as he moved forward once again, ignoring Quill and Nebula, seeming unable to tear his gaze from his brother. “Thank the Norns.”

Loki didn’t look at Thor, keeping his eyes on the ground and his fingers clamped around Tony’s arm. He let go only when Tony pulled the nanotech armour back into the reactor, but as soon as it was gone he curled an arm around Tony’s waist from behind.
Tony wasn’t happy, but he leaned back into the touch, unable to stop himself from taking the offered comfort.

“What happened?” asked Steve, his eyes darting between Tony’s clear exhaustion and Strange’s injuries.

“We lost the Time Stone,” said Strange, his voice little more than a whispering croak. He fell into the armchair that Steve had just vacated, his head in his left hand while his right slumped painfully at his side.

Steve’s eyes widened, and he looked to Tony in a clear request for some kind of comforting statement. Tony didn’t have one to give.

“That is not good,” said Thor.

Strange’s eyes narrowed in a mix of annoyance and pain, and then with another tired gesture and a circle of orange, he was gone.

“Not good.” Nebula turned from the wall, her blank expression excluding anger. “Thanos now has four of the Infinity Stones, and your only response is not good?”

“Four?” Thor asked, aghast.

“Are you upset that you’re still alive?” Tony asked Nebula, feeling like he was approaching the lesser of the two evils. “If I’d known I could have just left you there—”

“How stupid do you have to be to bring him all three of the remaining Stones at once?” she interrupted. “How could you—”

“It was the only chance we had at beating him—”

“The only chance?” Nebula tilted her head. “It would seem that you have no chance now, then.”

“Enough,” said Steve, stepping in. “Ma’am, I am sorry that you have lost your friend—”

“My friend?” Nebula let out a harsh laugh. “She was not my friend. She was my sister.”

Steve’s expression fell. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Why?” Nebula asked coldly, her head tilting to the side in mocking curiosity. “You didn’t know her, and you don’t know me. You can leave your sympathy with someone who wants it.”

“I know what it is to lose a sibling,” said Thor, his words sad as he laid a hand on Nebula’s shoulder. Tony knew just as well as everyone else in the room that Thor had not been speaking of his own sister.

Nebula shuddered hard, and shoved Thor away. “Do not touch me,” she snapped.

Loki was trembling, too, and Tony knew it was only a matter of time before he left again. He gripped the arms at his waist hard, wishing he could keep them there— or, at the very least, that Loki would take Tony with him.

“Hey,” said Barnes, his tone low and calm. He had remained silent until then, standing in the kitchen and merely observing, but chose that moment to move into the living room proper. “Why don’t you come and rest a bit, regain your strength?”
Tony flinched as Barnes moved closer, but Loki’s hold was like iron, preventing him from going anywhere. He noticed that Barnes was careful with his words, and when he moved forward he didn’t head directly toward Nebula, moving closer instead at an angle like one would with a frightened animal.

Nebula’s eyes narrowed, suspicious, but she didn’t back away like she had with everyone else.

“Bucky,” Steve started, but Barnes shook his head.

“It’s all right,” he said, his eyes still on Nebula. His words were soft but not pitying as he changed direction and moved for the elevator, giving her the choice without pressuring. “Why don’t you come with me? I can show you some food, and a bed. Or just a place to clean up, if you’d rather not sleep.”

Tony didn’t get it. Maybe Nebula just felt like she had nothing left to lose, or maybe she saw some similarity in Barnes’ metal arm. But she went with him to the elevator, her movements just as sleek as always despite the way she kept a tight grip on Loki’s dagger that remained at her waist.

With only four left in the room, the air almost rang with silence.

It was Steve who broke it with the question they had all been waiting for. “What happened?”

“We lost,” Tony told him.

“Thanos will be back soon,” said Loki. “You must prepare. I will show you the location, which I know for certain, though the timing is less so. We were interrupted.”

“You decided to lead him back here?” Steve asked incredulously, unable to stop himself from glancing to Thor. “After what he did last time?”

“Steve,” Tony warned.

“I did what was best for this pitiful planet, and the rest of the universe,” said Loki. “Do not insult me. I am an Avenger now, am I not? You’ve said as much.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Steve said, and he really did seem sincerely apologetic.

“Whether you meant it or not, it is what others will think,” Loki said. “But you need to prepare them.”

“Brother—“ started Thor, but Tony was not able to hear the end of the sentence, for Loki had already transported them up to the penthouse. Tony felt a little bad for Steve and Thor, who had been left below with barely any explanation, but he had wanted out of there almost as much as Loki. Their living space was thankfully free of people, something Tony knew they both sorely needed.

But.

That didn’t mean they had the time to relax. There were so many things that they needed to discuss, and Tony wasn’t going to let the moment go to waste.

“You’re not going to be able to avoid him forever, you know,” said Tony, leaning back against Loki’s chest.

“I can try,” Loki replied, his lips turning up in a small smile as he leaned down and pressed them to the side of Tony’s jaw.
Tony shook his head and turned around, not pulling away from Loki’s hold but moving so he could look at him properly, letting Loki read his face.

“You’re upset with me,” Loki said, his voice soft and accepting. Tony didn’t deny it.

“You promised me that you wouldn’t do this anymore!” he snapped, pressing his hand too hard against Loki’s shoulder. “You promised!”

“I saw Thanos destroy Thor in a moment,” Loki said quietly, not bothering to draw out the question. “I couldn’t watch him kill you. And besides, you know that my intent in leaving was never to fight him.” Loki’s voice grew harder. “I wouldn’t do that to you, because you’re right— I did promise. But I have a plan.”

“So share it,” Tony said, his hand sliding down to be replaced by his forehead, his voice muffled against the heavy leather. “Just tell me, Loki.”

“Luring Thanos to Midgard was only the beginning.” The corner of Loki’s mouth quirked up, though the smile did not reach his eyes. “I have an idea for how we can end him, once and for all.”

There was a pause, and Tony’s fingers curled tightly into the edge of Loki’s leather tunic. Loki sighed heavily enough that his breath ruffled Tony’s hair, and then Tony felt Loki’s hand come to rest on the small of his back, holding him close.

“I love you, Anthony,” Loki said. “I would tear the universe apart if it meant that I could always keep you safe.”

It was sentence that should have had Tony’s heart blossoming with warmth, but rather than comfort, Loki’s words only made Tony’s gut settle into a pit of dread.
Collective intelligence

Chapter Summary

Honestly, if any more violent women showed up in Tony’s tower he doubted that he would make it to his next birthday, golden apple or not.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry guys, with everything happening irl at the moment I didn't have the time to write last weekend. At least you get an extra long chapter this week to hopefully make up for it?

Tony hated Loki’s plan. He hated it with a roiling, burning passion. He hated it so much that he went back downstairs to tell the others, shouting and yelling and near shattering the careful equilibrium that the Avengers had managed to build with just so many people in the Tower at once, but every single one of them had agreed with Loki.

Even Thor.

“I do not have to like it to agree that it is the plan most likely to succeed,” Thor said when Tony had questioned his motives, his voice firm and uncompromising. “Loki has thought of many risky plans in the past, and when we have implemented them, they often end up saving my life.” Thor smiled fondly, then. “When we fought the dark elf Malekith, for example. Loki suggested that he pretend to betray me by casting an illusion to make it seem as if he had sliced off my hand—“

“Loki nearly died then,” Tony interrupted. “I’ve heard that story.”

“But he didn’t,” Thor pointed out, causing Loki to flash a short, but smug grin. “And from what I understand, it was that very incident that brought him to you.”

“That’s not the point,” Tony groaned. “There’s far too much risk—“

“Well, I think that this is great plan,” said Quill, butting in from where he and his team had been listening on the sidelines. “Even if it doesn’t work, I vote we have someone waiting in the wings to use the distraction to stab him in the back, kill him from behind.”

“You’re only for this because you only care about Gamora,” Tony snapped, turning and facing him. He was half aware that he was only arguing for the sake of being contrary, and that it certainly wasn’t Quill he was angry at, yet he couldn’t help the sharp barb. “You don’t care about us, you don’t care about Earth.”

Quill didn’t deny it. “The only reason you’re against this plan is because you only care about Loki,” he snapped back. “If it weren’t for that ass-kissing git you’d see that this is the best way.”

And, well, that was something that Tony couldn’t deny, either– though the name-calling certainly
rubbed him the wrong way. He needed to focus, though.

“It’s suicide,” Tony replied sharply. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s going to work or not, what matters is—“

“Anthony.”

Tony paused in his rant, breathing heavily. Loki stepped between Tony and the others, taking him into his arms and pressing a hand to the back of Tony’s head, gently guiding it down to rest on Loki’s shoulder.

It almost felt like everyone in the busy room was holding their breath as Tony allowed himself to relax, unable to fight it.

“Come on,” said Thor, his words sounding incredibly soft compared to those that had recently been spoken, though it was probably no different from his usual. “There is no need to be worrying about this now—“

“I will always worry about this,” Tony tried, but he was overruled.

“Thor’s right,” said Loki, and the fact that those two words had just come from Loki’s mouth, laced together in the same sentence just screamed diversionary tactic, but Thor didn’t even seem to notice. He lit up like a Tesla lamp and grinned at his brother, his teeth flashing as he almost seemed to lean forward in delight. Tony, meanwhile, simply glared up at Loki in betrayal.

“We have time until Thanos arrives,” Steve agreed. “Loki, you said that the time was uncertain, but—“

“Less than a month,” Loki said, nodding without loosening his hold on Tony. “But no more than a week before that.”

“Time to organise, then,” said Rhodey. “And we’re going to need to be organised if this is going to work.”

“I’ll talk to Ross,” said Steve. “We’re going to need to speak to the UN directly.” He paused. “We’re going to need more than just the UN.”

“Asgard will lend what aid that we can,” said Thor. “Loki, if you would help me in sending a message to Lady Sif?”

Tony felt Loki nod again, and then he began to converse with Thor while T’Challa announced his own support, and the conversation degenerated into a mess of planning with every person contributing this, that, or the other. Strange piped in with numbers of people he thought might be willing to help and Quill loudly stated that he may be able to get support from something called the Ravagers if Tony was willing to pay them, which, well. While agreeing to work with a group of aliens that they had never met and were, according to Drax, “not the worst criminals” he had ever met was probably not the best of ideas, Tony supposed they needed as much help as they could get, and if the space pirates were willing to fight against Thanos—

Steve suggested they leave that one up to the UN, which was probably a good idea, in all honesty.

It was during a lull in the conversation when T’Challa had left to make a call and Sam had offered to get everyone a drink that Steve approached Tony with a dangerous spark in his eye.

“There is something I have been burning to ask you, Tony,” he said.
“What?” Tony asked warily. A thousand scenarios were hurtling through his mind in the moment that it took Steve to draw a breath, already thinking up responses to questions about building weapons or recruiting rivals or the trip to Thanos’ ship and losing the Time Stone, which to be honest he was surprised he hadn’t yet been blamed for—

“Do the words ‘golden apple’ ring any bells?”

Tony froze, and he felt more than heard Loki sigh.

“What did you do?” Loki asked wryly.

“Nothing,” Tony said quickly, the surprise only lasting a moment as he scrambled to reassess Steve’s expression. “I think Peter let something slip, there’s no way I—“

“There’s no way you’re pinning this on me,” Peter called from across the room, and just like that everyone was listening in on the conversation.

“Golden apples?” asked Bruce, his eyes lighting up with curiosity even as he frowned in concern.

“Tony,” said Thor. “Did you not inform your comrades of your new longevity?”

Tony did a quick assessment of the situation, and then raised his hands appealingly. “I see how this might come across as reckless—“

“Reckless?” asked Clint— Tony couldn’t actually see the archer through the crowded room, but he recognised the voice. “What if you hurt yourself in the field, or something happened and we didn’t know what you were capable of? Since you told Steve, you must have realised that to some extent —“

“Yeah, Tony,” said Natasha, crossing her arms with a smirk. “How come you told Steve but not us?”

“Okay,” said Tony. “So I got a little bit stabbed by the crazy alien, and I had to explain that I would heal quickly to stop Cap from having a panic attack. So what?”

“I thought Thor said that anyone who stole from Iðunn would face serious consequences,” said Bruce.

“Uh, that was before Thor became King of Asgard,” Tony pointed out.

“We have been pardoned from the theft,” Loki confirmed.

“Tony,” Steve said with that disappointed crease to his brow that only Steve could ever manage to pull off. “You stole from Asgard?”

“Well, it was Loki’s idea—“

“So he’s slightly immortal,” said Rocket, butting in as per usual, and Tony couldn’t see him either but he could almost hear the eye roll. “Surely that can only be a good thing, what with Thanos and all.”

“You can join the club,” Quill added. “Trust me, a little extra durability can be useful.”

“They’re right,” said Bruce. “Tony, you should have told us, but I don’t think anyone can count this as a bad thing.” The corners of his lips twitched, and it was clear he was fighting not to look at Steve. “Excepting the burglary, of course.”
“The Einherjar certainly did,” Tony muttered.

“Of course this isn’t a bad thing,” Thor agreed. He looked as if he was about to say more, but he caught Loki’s gaze and stopped himself.

“Okay,” Tony said, jumping on that opportunity to end the conversation as quickly as he could. “Any more questions, or are we done talking about my private life?”

“Hey, Mr Stark, I have been wondering, actually,” said Peter, and the innocent smile on his face immediately had Tony on guard. “Does this mean you and Mr Loki are married?”

Tony would like the record to show that his glare was sharp enough that Peter flinched. (That’s not the truth of course. But there was just so many people in the room that who’s to say anyone could see Peter’s expression properly?)

Then Loki started to cackle, and the tension was broken as everyone began to drift back into their own conversations— though Tony didn’t think it was arrogant to assume that most of those conversations were somehow about him. Peter’s certainly was, if the shit-eating grin on his face was any indication.

“I’m happy for you, Tones,” said Rhodey, clapping him on the shoulder with a smile that was far too bright for the anxiety Tony had suffered while imagining this very moment. “I feel sorry for Loki, though,” Rhodey continued. “Can’t imagine the trials he’s going to be put through in the next few centuries.”

“Don’t worry,” Tony said with a smirk. “He knows it’ll be worth his while.”

Rhodey stared at him for a moment, his usual joking ‘I’m not paid enough for this bullshit’ expression in place for a moment before his eyes went soft.

“Seriously, though,” Rhodey said. “I know it must have been a hard thing, but I see the way you are with him. I think you made the right choice.”

Tony felt a lump in his throat, and ducked his head even as he leaned against Rhodey’s shoulder a little. Rhodey had clearly worked out what that apple meant – the bad that was going to come with the good – but he supported Tony anyway. “Thanks, Platypus.”

“I really don’t envy you though, man,” Rhodey said, and when Tony glanced back up curiously, Rhodey gave him a wink. “You’re going to have to tell Pepper yourself.”

—•—

Tony knew it wasn’t healthy, but he found that he couldn’t help it. The constant anxiety was almost suffocating, like he was drowning in his own home, and that was a sensation that he would always go out of his way to avoid.

He would wake up in the morning and head downstairs to grab some breakfast, and freeze up at the sight of Barnes at the kitchen counter. After two mornings in a row, he’d already started to down his coffee up in the penthouse before heading straight to his workshop. He’d frozen at the entrance to the gym more than once, quietly backing away and hoping that Barnes was too engrossed in his spar with Steve to notice. He’d taken to avoiding group bonding nights, claiming to want to just spend the evenings making up for lost time with Loki– which wasn’t entirely a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth, either. Tony was sure that Loki knew exactly what he was doing, and he would be forever grateful for the way that Loki never complained, and always backed him up with the other Avengers when they pressured harder for the pair to join them for dinner, or movies, or, god forbid, board
games.

If Tony had been asked to guess who would be the first to call him out on his attempts at avoidance, he would, without a doubt, have said Steve. But maybe Steve didn’t realise that it was specifically Barnes– he seemed overwhelmed by the number of people in the Tower as well, and could be forgiven for thinking that Tony was just trying to escape the masses.

The living quarters in Avengers Tower were large and had always seemed spacious despite almost the whole team using it as their primary residence, but recently it seemed that even such prime real estate was reaching maximum capacity. Tony had been overjoyed to hear that T’Challa was taking up the offer to stay with the team rather than move to his own accommodations, but his country, it seemed, were not willing to leave their king to his own devices. They had sent a member of their Dora Milaje, who were apparently an elite fighting force of female warriors. The woman was truly frightening in a manner that Tony could only describe in terms that would combine the auras of Pepper and Natasha– a mix of domineering and dangerous all rolled into the one terrifying glare that had Tony giving Okoye a wide berth ever since. But between the two Wakandans, six Guardians, eleven Avengers (if you included Sam and Rhodey), the additional super soldier, and also now Ant-Man, the Tower was well past cramped. Tony supposed he should feel grateful for the fact that Strange had opted to stay in his own den of antiquities, but even so there was just no hope of finding an unoccupied corner. Still, one would think that with so many people the variety would at least give some measure of comfort—

Yet Tony never seemed to fail to run into Barnes.

And his absolute last guess as to who would have called him out on his actions was Pietro Maximoff.

Tony had been taking a risk by sitting in the common living room, but he had wanted to talk to Rhodey, T’Challa, and Thor about strategy– in his book, anything that made it less likely for Loki’s plan to be needed was worth the time. T’Challa had implied in an earlier conversation that his sister may have some technology that could help bottleneck the inevitable battle, and Thor was still willing to hold up to Odin’s agreement to lend Midgard a portion of the Asgardian soldiers who had survived Thanos’ earlier siege. So Tony had been sitting on the newly purchased couch, with Loki at his side, leaning over the holograms JARVIS was kind enough to pull up over the coffee table.

Barnes had simply walked into the room and moved to the kitchen, and Tony shouldn’t have paid any attention. No one else did, after all. But his position on the couch meant that his back was to the kitchen, to Barnes, and Tony couldn’t help but tense up.

It wasn’t that he thought Barnes was going to attack him– he knew, logically, that Barnes was on their side, that while his time in Wakanda had not entirely healed him it had at least been enough to shake free HYDRA’s control.

Unfortunately, though, it seemed that Tony’s anxiety paid little attention to what was and was not logical, and his muscles had frozen and ached for the whole five minutes it had taken for Barnes to make a sandwich and then leave the way he came.

At first, Tony thought Loki was the only one who had noticed. Not that Loki commented on it, but one of his hands had moved from his own lap to rest on Tony’s wrist, a comforting, grounding weight that gave Tony something to try and focus on. But he couldn’t relax until he heard the elevator whisking Barnes away, and when he did, he slumped down against Loki in an involuntary movement that he hoped was imperceptible to anyone else.

Except… Rhodey had gone quiet, and when Tony looked back up, his best friend was watching him with concern, and he thought that he maybe hadn’t been as subtle as he had hoped. Maybe the others
were simply being courteous by not commenting— they all knew, after all. Rhodey and Loki had heard it from Tony himself, and T’Challa had sheltered Barnes for months. And while Thor had been rather absent recently, Tony knew that he was far from obtuse, and had far too much experience with family matters to not have noticed the tension in the Tower since Barnes’ arrival.

It was a little overwhelming, and Tony felt the need to get some air. So he gripped Loki’s hand tightly for a moment and stood, heading for the hidden stairwell in lieu of the elevator, intending to head up to the penthouse and go to the balcony to catch a few breaths.

He was halfway up when a call from below caused him to pause.

“Stark,” Maximoff said, his steely-blue gaze hard and cutting as he looked up from the landing Tony had just climbed past. “Can I talk to you, please?”

Tony frowned. Pietro had been in the corner of the living room, reading a book or a magazine or something, Tony hadn’t cared enough to check. He certainly didn’t want to talk, but he knew there was no way to outrun Quicksilver. So he nodded, and took the few steps back down to be on the same level.

Tony wasn’t sure what he had been expecting, but he sure as hell hadn’t been prepared for a physical assault.

“You killed my parents,” Pietro said, shoving Tony hard against the wall without warning and with enough force that Tony was sure he would be left with bruised shoulders.

“Oh, come on,” Tony snapped, pushing back and narrowing his eyes in a glare. “I thought we were past this—“

“Past it?” Pietro tilted his head, matching Tony’s expression. “How can I be past it? That isn’t something that you just get past—“

“I’ll explain to you the same thing that I said to your sister,” Tony snapped. “I didn’t kill them, I didn’t fire those weapons, and I didn’t even sell them. I’ve had problems dealing with the guilt in the past, but I know that it wasn’t my fault. The man who did all that is dead, and I have done my best to right the wrongs since then, even though it was not my fault.”

“Was it not?” Pietro was leaning in close, and Tony could read his expression as clear as day. There was definitely anger there, but it was closer to frustration than vengeful rage, and that was confusing. “It may not have been your intention to kill my parents, but if you had not existed then maybe they would still be alive!”

“They would have got their weapons from somewhere else if not from Stane,” Tony spat. “I know that doesn’t make what my company did okay, but it sure as hell does not mean that I was at fault!”

“So you admit it, then?” Pietro asked, and Tony was thrown for a moment by the change in tack. “You admit that someone can be a part of something without being at fault? That someone can be used by forces that are out of their own control?”

Tony paused, his own anger almost draining away as he realised what Pietro was trying to do. But it came back in full force a moment later because how dare he, how dare he think that he had the right to dredge up old wounds and—

“This situation is different,” Tony snapped, even though he couldn’t help but feel that Pietro had a point. Hadn’t he compared the situations himself, once?
But of course, everything looked a little different when it was staring you right in the face.

“How?” asked Pietro. “I blamed you for my parents’ death for a long time, and I know that my sister still does. She’s getting better, she’s had therapy, but she—” He cut himself off, and shook his head. “You do not want to hear about her. But you need to hear something. Do you remember what I did? When I first came here?”

Tony didn’t answer.

“I avoided you,” Pietro said, clearly too impatient to wait for a response. “I did not wish to be in the same room as you.”

“Too bad that’s still not a problem for you,” Tony muttered. He tried to duck around and leave the hallway, but Pietro was just too fucking fast.

“It isn’t a problem,” Pietro echoed, still in Tony’s face despite the fact that the aggression was melting away. “I still hate looking at you, I still hate all that your name represents.” He paused, for a moment, and then corrected himself to— “To all that it used to represent. You don’t any more, you said that you help people now and you do. And I might not be able to move past all that has happened, but I can see past it, and I am still able to work with the person that you are now to help save the world, because that’s what needs to be done.”

“You’ve crossed a line, Maximoff,” Tony said as Pietro let him go, pushing away from the wall and brushing down his clothes. He knew that his words were not as strong as he wanted them to be. He knew that Pietro had a point.

“You need to get your head in the game,” Pietro said firmly. He held Tony’s gaze with his hard expression set in stone for a solid couple of seconds, before he shook his head once with a flinching jerk and turned to go back into the common area, leaving Tony in the middle of the empty hallway, staring after him in confusion.

—•—

Things didn’t… immediately just change after that. Tony didn’t really think that they ever truly would, but he made an effort— and in doing so, he noticed that Barnes had been avoiding him as well. Perhaps that was why Steve hadn’t tried to push Tony into talking to him. Perhaps Steve could see that they both needed their space.

Barnes had been tortured and used and put through the wringer in all the worst possible ways, but he was still smart, and he was certainly one hell of a survivor. They all were, and they would all do whatever it took to get through this— even if it meant putting on a brave face and working together.

Not long after the conversation in the stairwell, their need to learn how to work as a team turned into something of a group concern.

It was about a week after the events of the battle in Central Park, and it was Tony’s turn to patrol. The patrols had been Rhodey’s suggestion, and the idea had been enthusiastically supported by the Council. The plan was to keep an eye out for anything strange, any indication that Thanos could be arriving early or scouting— and, rather morbidly, as a deterrent to the general public should a ‘the end is nigh’ attitude begin to take hold and people started to loot.

It was a hard thing. Central park was scarred, wreckage still cordoned off and the grass where they had fought still blackened and burned. The surrounding buildings had sustained some damage as well, from the Outriders that had managed to escape the perimeter. Yet still people looked up and
pointed to the sky as he flew by, excited to see an Avenger. It felt odd even now to have people look at him like he was some kind of hero, but if it gave them some measure of hope then he was glad to have been of service.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the patrol wasn’t fated to be peaceful– though the disruption didn’t come from Thanos, nor from the civilian population.

“Sir, there’s an intruder in the Tower,” JARVIS said. “The scanners you set up after Mr Lang’s arrival have detected movement, but it is too small for me to stop.”

Without hesitation, Tony was wheeling around and heading back.

“Have you alerted the others?” he asked.

“Captain Rogers is on his way to the common floor, and I am in the process of warning Mr Liesmith. Others are on standby, but I do not believe there is much of a threat.”

“Hostile?”

“I do not know the purpose of this intrusion, Sir.”

“You said the readings were similar to Lang’s?” Tony asked, and when JARVIS indicated that he was correct, he added, “All right. Let Steve know I’m on my way.”

As per JARVIS’ information, Tony flew straight to the common floor and entered via the balcony. Sam, Scott, Clint, Quill, and Rocket were seated around the table, with playing cards and M&M’s scattered in a somewhat orderly fashion between them. The Avengers appeared to have been teaching the Guardians how to play poker, though from the look Tony got of Rocket’s hand, the raccoon had already worked it out and was about to sweep the floor with all of them. Or, he would have– but the cards in their hands were all drooping, and their attention was on Steve, who was grasping his shield tightly and had his gaze firmly locked on the vent in the ceiling.

“I can check it out, you know,” Clint was saying to him. “I know those vents like the—“

“If you get stuck up there, I’m not going after you, man,” Sam said.

“I could check it out,” Scott volunteered. He looked a bit like a little kid on their first day with a new friend group, doing all he could to impress but hoping that his offer would be rejected all the same.

Loki was there as well, though it was clear that he had recently arrived– he was wearing the close fitting workout clothes and black arm braces that he usually only broke out for sparring practice. Natasha was beside him, in combat gear and with batons already in hand, giving away the identity of Loki’s sparing partner. Tony was almost disappointed– he would have paid good money to watch that fight.

As if he could feel Tony’s gaze on him, Loki glanced down from the vent and moved toward him, his brow creasing in a frown.

“JARVIS said the intruder is something small,” Loki said.

“Very small,” Tony agreed, remembering the display JARVIS had shown him on the HUD before he’d folded away the armour. Loki glanced to Scott purposefully, then turned back to Tony with raised eyebrows. So JARVIS must have given Loki the same info, then.

As they watched, a creature flew out of the vent that was no larger than a wasp, though the beat of its
wings was far too silent to belong to a true insect. Then the creature’s body almost seemed to explode as it increased in size and became a woman dressed for a fight, her cybernetic wings furling into the unit on her back as she landed on the ground.

Tony smiled, easily making the connection.

“Oh, shit,” said Scott, almost falling off his seat in his haste to stand. “Quick, someone hide me—“

But he was too slow, for the woman crossed the room in long, sure strides and decked Scott right on the jaw, knocking him to the ground.

Scott glared at them all as the expected ‘oooooh’ ran around the room. He rubbed at his jaw and clambered to his feet, but as he looked at the masked woman his glare fell away.

“Yeah, okay,” he groaned. “I deserved that.”

“Damn right you did.” The woman tapped the side of her helmet which folded away to reveal the familiar, expected face, and Tony took the opportunity to jump in.

“Hope van Dyne,” he said loudly. “Hasn’t it been a while?”

“Stark,” Hope greeted bluntly, her eyes narrowing. And honestly, if any more violent women showed up in Tony’s tower he doubted that he would make it to his next birthday, golden apple or not.

Thankfully, though, Hope’s attention was firmly on Scott.

“What did you think you were doing?” She asked.

“Uh.” Scott glanced to the others as if asking for help before turning back to her. “Avenging?”

Hope snorted harshly. “Right,” she said. “I suppose using the word ‘think’ might have been giving you too much credit.”

“I did think about it!” Scott replied. “I told Cassie I would be gone and everything.”

“But you didn’t think to tell us?”

Scott glanced away and rubbed the back of his neck. “I didn’t think you’d let me come.”

“So you stole the suit and just left?” Hope snapped. “How could you do that to us? My father specifically told you to stay out of this!”

“Hank isn’t the—“

“As long as you are using his suit, he is the boss of you and you know it—“

“He shouldn’t get a say in whether or not I’m risking my life—“

“It’s his technology—“

“It’s the Avengers—“

“Exactly!” Hope shot Scott a withering glare. “If you think that my father could ever condone you putting his technology within the grasp of Tony Stark—“
“Hey,” Tony said, unable to keep his mouth shut. “I would never—“

Hope’s glare turned on Tony, and he held up his hands in surrender immediately.

“The whole world is on the line, Hope,” Scott said harshly. “What’s the secrecy of technology compared to that? How can I just stand by when I know that I can help?”

Hope seemed thrown for a moment, but she was stubborn enough to keep arguing. “You didn’t have to just go and join the Avengers on a whim—“

“Hey, they asked me—“

“And I’m sure that you were appropriately cautious when you thought about the offer,” Hope replied, her tone so dry that it could have made one of Pepper’s martinis jealous.

“Hope,” Scott said, shrugging almost helplessly. “Come on. What do you want me to say?”

“Well,” she muttered, narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms. “An apology would be a good place to start.”

Loki grinned, and leaned in to whisper in Tony’s ear. “I like her.”

“You would,” Tony muttered back.

“I like her, too.” Unlike the others, Natasha didn’t bother to lower her tone, and Hope glanced over to her curiously. “We need more girls on this team,” Natasha added.

Hope’s lips twitched, though Tony was sure the tick wasn’t fuelled by amusement. “I do feel for you.”

“It’s terrible,” Natasha deadpanned. Then she looked to Steve, raising a brow. “View’s not bad though. But seriously,” she said, “We could use the help.”

Steve nodded despite having just completed a perfect eye roll. “Definitely,” he agreed.

“I can tell that you’re desperate,” Hope replied, gesturing to Scott. “You let this guy in, after all.”

“Okay, low blow,” Scott said. “And yeah, look. I am sorry, all right? I know I shouldn’t have just left, I know I should have told you, but you and especially your dad made your aversion to everything Avengers pretty damn clear. But you said you saw what happened, you know what’s at stake, here.” Scott pressed his lips together as if he couldn’t quite decide whether to continue, but he seemed to steel himself and said— “You can’t pretend that you haven’t worked out what’s coming, and what it means. The Avengers need all the help they can get, and if I can help but I don’t?” He shrugged. “How am I ever supposed to look Cassie in the eye ever again? How could I live with myself if she suffers because some alien invaded and I did nothing?”

Some of the harshness in Hope’s expression seemed to melt away, but none of the stubbornness. She looked no less thorny as she spoke to Steve.

“All right,” she said. “I’m not going to join you, but I’ll help. On one condition.” She turned to Tony, her sharp green eyes like needles. “Stark keeps his hands of our tech.”

Tony smirked. “As long as you keep your hands off mine.”

“If we’re going to work together, we need to learn to work together,” Steve stressed.
“I know,” Hope replied. “Doesn’t mean I’m letting him look at my tech.”

There was a tense moment, which thankfully, Natasha broke.

“We’re going to need to train,” she said.

“I agree,” Steve said quickly. “Us Avengers have fought together for a while now, and all these new recruits are strong, but used to fighting alone.”

“Hope and I have trained together,” said Scott.

“But not in a large group,” Tony stepped in. “It’s different, trust me.”

“This is not going to be fun,” Loki sighed. “Can I—”

“Oh, you are not getting out of this,” Tony said. “It’s like Steve said, most of us are used to going at it alone, or in small groups. We’re going to need all of the military experience we can get, and I am quite certain that you and Thor beat out everyone else.”

“Well, I have grown quite used to fighting in groups recently,” said Rocket, finally throwing down his cards and scooping up the large pile of M&M’s from the middle of the table. “Does that mean that I—”

“No one is going to get out of it,” Steve cut in.

Clint was frowning, and Tony expected him to begin complaining about extra forced training sessions. But then—

“Cheat!” the archer yelled, throwing down his hand and pointing to the cards. “You can’t have had the king of spades, I had it!”

“But I’ve never played this game before,” Rocket said, crossing his arms. “How was I supposed to know which cards would help me win? Maybe you’re the one who cheated.”

“This is going to be so awesome,” said Scott, ignoring the mess of the game he had been playing not long before. He looked to Hope, that almost kidlike nervousness still playing on the edge of his expression. “Are you sure that Hank is going to be all right with you staying?”

“Well,” Hope said, drawing out the syllable and adding a nonchalant shrug for good measure. “He doesn’t exactly know that I’m here, either.”

Despite knowing that he was probably going to have to deal with another phone call from Pym in the near future, Tony couldn’t help but laugh along with the others.

—•—

The first training session went about as well as could be expected— that is to say that it was a complete and utter disaster.

At Steve’s suggestion, they had decided to start with a simple demonstration of skills.

They began with Pietro, who ran rings around them all, and then moved to a riveting spar between T’Challa and Steve. Nebula and Natasha fought to a terrifying standstill, while Clint shot all of the tiny targets Strange summoned for him with magic. Hope put them all to shame by knocking Thor to the ground in two seconds flat, and then Thor, after a hearty laugh and a good-natured handshake with the Wasp, had shown them all just how dangerous he could be by knocking Tony out of the air.
almost as fast. (It was a pot shot with the hammer. Tony would win on the rematch.) Tony managed to outfly Rhodey but couldn’t keep up with Peter’s spidey-sense, and Sam put up an amazing show of aerobatics but had to be caught by Thor when Scott short-circuited his wings from the inside.

“Seriously, TicTac?” Sam grumbled as he took off his gear. “Again?”

They were reluctant to let Hulk join in, but they knew that the others would need to be pre-warned, and that it was best to do so in the relatively safe environment. They were all suitably impressed, and when Hulk asked who wanted to be smashed first, Drax roared in excitement. But before he had the chance, Mantis was stepping forward and raising a hand with a bright smile on her face.

After that, it seemed like she became the person to beat.

It quickly became apparent, however, that Mantis could knock out anyone who touched her bare skin but otherwise her fighting skills were severely lacking—she stood no chance against anyone with long distance weapons, or blades with a long reach like Okoye’s spear, or even someone as skilled with a shorter blade as Loki was. If they did not have to touch her, they could beat her. For someone in full armour like Tony, Rhodey, or even Scott and Hope, Mantis proved no threat at all.

“Creatures like Outriders who use no weapons are no match against her,” Loki summarised. “But she will have little chance against the Chitauri’s guns.”

Tony nodded, as Loki’s words ran right in line with his own thoughts.

Steve, however, disagreed. “She has weaknesses,” he admitted, “but there are enough of us here that we only need to tap into everyone’s strengths. The whole purpose of this exercise is to work out how we can fight as a team, and a good team covers each other’s backs.”

But it soon became clear that they had an awfully long way to go.

The bout between Peter and Steve didn’t last long—Peter seemed intent to prove his worth against the legendary Captain America, and tied Steve in knots with his webbing, the shield stuck tightly to a wall. Peter bowed dramatically in victory and Natasha took the opportunity to teach him not to let down his guard. But Peter’s spidey-sense had him darting out of the way, and the Widow’s bite hit Drax instead.

That was where their mistake became apparent. They had thought that fighting each other would be a good way to showcase their skills, but they hadn’t considered the fact that fighting could, well, lead to fighting.

Thankfully, Drax didn’t take the biting shock as an attack, but unfortunately he did take it as a challenge.

He charged forward with his arms outstretched, and Natasha grinned as she crouched down and activated her electric batons, the power surging through her suit and crackling in the air. Drax’s grin only widened at the sight, and didn’t diminish in the slightest when, instead of using the weapons, Natasha merely sidestepped and left Drax to go careering past her. That might have been the end of it if Drax’s trajectory hadn’t sent him bowling into a recently reawakened Hulk.

Drax, of course, seemed happy with that arrangement, but Groot decided it looked like he needed help. That, of course, got Rocket involved, and when taser-discs started flying in all directions Clint yelled something along the lines of “every man for himself” and then the whole room just turned into a melee.

Steve was trying to calm them but he was still in a bit of a sticky situation, and there was only so
much he could do with his voice. Rocket, meanwhile, saw an opportunity and ran for the shield stuck to the wall. Barnes grabbed Rocket by the scruff of his neck and picked him up before he had the chance to grab the shield, and Groot knocked Barnes over the head.

On the other side of the room, Tony saw Scott shoot Hope a grin before punching at his belt, and then suddenly Scott was twice as tall as Hulk and picking up Sam with one hand.

Okoye and Hope exchanged a long-suffering look and an eye roll, and then the two of them turned and left the training room.

Honestly, Tony might have joined them, but then Peter was thrown into the ceiling as Drax enjoyed grabbing and swinging one of his webs a little too much. So Tony flew up to catch the kid, taking an entirely too enthusiastic hit from Quill as he did so. He knew Quill still wasn’t over their argument the other day.

By that point, they were all involved. Steve had managed to get free, and was using his shield to deflect a barrage of Clint’s arrows. Natasha and Nebula were holding their own against T’Challa, only to turn on each other when Mantis poked them both from behind. Scott was cackling like a maniac as he swung Sam around, who looked about to chuck from the inertia. Loki was cackling too, though that was because he had somehow tricked Strange into attacking a wall with a glowing orange whip despite his cloak’s best attempts to drag him away.

A repulsor beam from behind nearly knocked Tony out of the air again, and he threw Peter to the side to fend for himself and turned to face Rhodey.

“Really?” he asked.

Rhodey shrugged. “I haven’t had the chance to do that in a while,” he said.

Tony responded with a repulsor beam of his own, laughing as Rhodey dodged and they fell into the dance they had performed for the others before, twisting and swerving through the air as they tried to catch each other off guard.

“At least we’re still getting some practice,” Rhodey pointed out. They both paused in the air for a moment, staring down at the carnage below. The ceiling of the training room was high enough that they were out of Scott’s reach, and they could see everything easily.

“I suppose,” Tony allowed. “Though this is going to be hell to clean up.”

“Why do you care, you’re not going to do it,” Rhodey snorted, and then flinched as Tony got him with a low level electric shock. “Hey!”

Well, Tony thought as Quill jetted up to join them in the air with guns blazing, Rhodey does have a point. Natasha and Nebula had not been the only two to pair up– Groot and Thor were tag-teaming Hulk, and T’Challa and Pietro had managed to free Sam. It was a mess, but it was all experience.

For all the chaos, this could almost be beneficial for them.

Then Rocket got curious and riled Hulk up enough to put a Thor-sized hole in the floor, and the training-session-turned-brawl was brought to a rather spectacular end when Loki caught Hulk in a web of green seiðr and forced him to drop Thor back to the ground.

“Enough!” Loki yelled, and if his previous show hadn’t been enough to stop the carnage, his voice certainly would have done the job. “You are all nothing but squabbling children! No doubt Thanos will arrive on the battlefield and laugh.”
“Well, that’s a bit harsh,” Rocket muttered.

Tony stumbled as he landed next to his lover, but kept his footing and removed his armour. His attention was drawn for a moment as Strange shook his head clear in confusion, glancing away from the wall and turning to Loki with a glare. He was quick to recognise the danger, though, and backed away as Tony approached Loki with caution.

“Everyone’s just messing around, Loki,” Tony said, reaching out. But Loki shrugged away his hand, his whole body tense and his fists tightly clenched at his sides.

“We shouldn’t just be messing around,” Loki snapped, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Thor’s head tilted back in a booming laugh. “I never thought I would hear you say that, Loki,” he chuckled.

It was clearly the wrong thing to say.

All hostility left Loki’s expression, leaving a blank slate, unreadable even to those who knew Loki best. His dead eyes remained on Thor, his lips pressed so tightly together that they had almost turned white.

“You have no idea,” Loki said, and although he didn’t look away from his brother, it was clear he was speaking to all of them.

“I’ve faced Thanos before,” Quill snapped, speaking out and showing his lack of sense.

Loki finally turned, pinning Quill with a harsh stare. “That’s not what I meant.”

He gave no more explanation than his frigid posture, but Thor seemed to understand— or at the very least believed that he understood before anyone else.

“I am fine, Loki,” he said, taking a small step toward his brother.

“Fine now,” Loki snapped, effectively stopping Thor in his tracks. “I know, all right? Everyone is so keen to remind me just how fine you are——“

“But you’re still upset,” Thor said. His expression was hard, and Tony almost cheered. It would, of course, have been better if they had decided to have this conversation when they were alone and not watched by a peanut gallery still full of pent up energy, but the conversation was long overdue.

Better this than never.

…Honestly, Tony should have seen it coming.

Rather than engaging in Thor’s attempts to reach out, Loki disappeared before his brother could continue with his sentence. Feeling a rather significant sense of déjà vu, Tony turned and headed for the exit, his shoulders slumped and the usual question on his lips.

JARVIS didn’t bother responding verbally. He merely opened the elevator doors, and took Tony where he needed to go.

——

Tony was surprised when he found Loki not in the penthouse, but in the workshop, standing in front of one of the Iron Man armours. Tony didn’t display them here like he did in Malibu, but his Mark XLVII was in need of repairs and was suspended to the side of the room, waiting for a moment
when Tony had enough time to give it the attention it deserved. Loki had his back to the door, so Tony couldn’t read his expression— not that it likely would have made any difference.

He moved slow, giving a concerned Dummy a quick pat as he passed. He paused before he got too close, still thinking on how to start, but Loki beat him to it.

“I told you that I do not want to talk to Thor,” Loki said, his jaw clenched. Tony supposed he should at least be glad that Loki seemed to want to talk, now.

“He’s trying to make things right—“

“He does not understand,” Loki interrupted, shaking his head.

“I’m pretty sure he does,” Tony said, working to keep any impatience or accusation out of his tone. “I’ve spoken with Thor after he thought you were dead. He’s lost you twice—“

“It’s not that he died,” Loki snapped. “He’s alive now, you heard him.” Loki’s fist tightened, though it couldn’t have been more clear that he wasn’t upset with Tony. “Thor is fine.”

And suddenly, it was like a clichéd light bulb had sparked to life over his head, and Tony had worked it out.

“But you’re not,” Tony said.

Loki breathed in deeply, closing his eyes. When Tony had first walked into the workshop, he had been expecting anger. But he understood now, and he wasn’t surprised that when Loki caught his gaze once again, the tightness in his expression was in no way upset.

They’d had it all wrong before.

Loki wasn’t mad at Thor, and he hadn’t been avoiding his brother because he wanted to avoid the living, breathing proof of what had happened in Central Park, though that incident was, of course, the root of it all.

In one single move, Thanos had broken through Loki’s carefully sculpted exterior and shattered his composure. By killing Thor, Thanos had proven how simple it was to take away something that Loki cared about, thus demonstrating just how easily he could make Loki break.

And Loki was scared.

It wasn’t just that Thor could die, or Tony, or anyone else. It wasn’t just that they had all been given a front row seat to just how powerful Thanos was. Loki was afraid because the only way he had come close to beating Thanos in the past was by outthinking him, and in finally breaking he believed that he had handed Thanos the key to his own destruction. It was a special brand of deep-rooted terror that Tony knew intimately, and he could understand why Loki would go to such lengths to avoid being reminded of it.

Tony knew there was nothing he could say that would make Loki feel better. He knew it, because years ago when he had been locked in that cave and he had almost put himself in the line of fire for Yinsen, or a few years after that when Killian had seen just how much he loved Pepper— nothing could have possibly taken away the sick feeling in his stomach, the fear not just for their life but of what he was capable of doing to keep them safe.

So instead of speaking, Tony merely pulled Loki in close and held him tight, hoping that even if it had little chance of making Loki feel better, that it might at least work as something to ground him.
Loki had been right, really, in the training room. For all their flying about and flashy shows, it was, well, not easy, but almost possible to forget just what they were training for. Even Loki had allowed himself to have a little fun messing with Strange. But this realisation of how Loki had been feeling and the fear that he had been carrying around was just more proof of how terrifying the situation truly was, and it was also the reminder that Tony didn’t realise that he had needed.

Yes, the plan that they had all decided upon would put Loki in danger, but it was the best plan that they had. So long as Thanos remained alive and free, he would always be coming for them. He would never let them go, and they would never know a moment’s peace. If they ever wanted to be able to relax, to be able to live their lives on their own terms, then they were going to have to take some risks— and Tony would have to live with the fact that Loki was willing to carry the burden.

And Tony knew that he would be able to do so, for he knew that one fact above all else remained true—

Loki wouldn’t be carrying it alone.
First inhale, second exhale

Chapter Summary

“You can’t just go around terrorising the mortals,” Thor hissed.

“Why not?” Loki complained. “Just because I agreed to be an Avenger doesn’t mean that I agreed to be boring.”

Chapter Notes

There're a lot of references in this chapter. I'm not going to bother apologising, you just have to deal with it.

Also. You may notice that I finally have some confidence in my chapter count, and since we're coming toward the end I thought I'd let you all know how close we are—though knowing me that number is probably still subject to change.

It seemed like things had been going well.

Wakanda had agreed to help, and T’Challa and Okoye had both uttered assurances that their forces were on their way. The Accords Council had agreed to take Steve’s proposal to the General Assembly, and Loki and Thor had managed to get a message through to Heimdall. Their own forces were beginning to shape up nicely, and for once Tony could almost begin to imagine that the humans wouldn’t be outnumbered by Outriders and Chitauri. And without the gauntlet, Thanos would be unable to use more than one Stone at a time, shattering his advantage.

Tony, of course, had taken the opportunity to quote the wisdom of Luna Lovegood. Unfortunately, he chose to do so with only Thor as an audience, and the Thunderer had agreed to the sentiment of ‘if it’s just him alone’ without a touch of irony. Loki would have understood it.

Still. Thanos was without the advantage, and without the ability to reclaim it. Because to his knowledge, Eitri’s hands were burned and smothered in molten Uru, fettered by irreversible damage.

So, yeah.

It seemed like things had been going well, until they remembered that Thanos had the Time Stone.

—•—

Tony had to fight not to reach for a drink while he waited, his left hand clenching and unclenching, aching with the missing sensation of a glass pressed into his palm. It was entirely unnerving, seeing Loki this way, sitting up straight yet almost appearing as if he were asleep but for the way he muttered under his breath and the stressed crease across his brow. Tony had never seen Loki attempt what he called ‘astral projection’ before, though the reason wasn’t difficult to discern— from the quick and terse explanation his lover had given him, it wasn’t hard to guess that there were some bad
memories associated with the skill.

There was a time not so long ago when Tony wouldn’t have even tried to resist the impulse to satisfy his thirst, but not when he knew that his presence was one of the only reasons why Loki could bring himself to do this. Loki had trusted him to watch over his body while he travelled the astral plane to discover whether Thanos had made the same connection they had in regard to the Time Stone, and it would be a cold day in hell before Tony let him down.

Tony didn’t understand how the whole thing worked, even when Strange had tried to twist the magical lingo into something slightly more scientific during an earlier discussion. But from what he could gather, Loki was leaving his body behind to visit somewhere else, therefore putting himself in slightly less danger (although Strange had assured Tony that there were certainly risks involved) and capable of observing something that was happening light-years away.

He supposed he should be glad that Loki hadn’t offered to go in person, but it didn’t soothe his nerves as the minutes began to stretch. Tony was just starting to worry and consider calling Strange to find out how long was too long when Loki woke with a loud gasp, curling in on himself and wrapping his arms around his middle.

“Are you all right?” Tony asked immediately, darting forward and gripping Loki’s shoulders, not attempting to guide him back upright but merely hoping that he could help ground him. “Loki, did he see you?”

“No.” The relief that coursed through Tony at Loki’s words was somewhat dimmed by what followed them. “He was too busy watching Eitri forge a new Infinity Gauntlet.”

Oh.

Not that they hadn’t been half expecting it, but. Still.

Fuck.

Tony swallowed hard. “Well,” he said, his voice only wobbling a little. “I suppose that’s not ideal, but we’re just going to have to work with it.”

“Work with it?” Loki stared at Tony incredulously. “He has four Infinity Stones now, and with another Gauntlet, he won’t be limited to using only one at a time.”

“We almost beat him before,” Tony replied. “There are more of us, now, and yes, it’s not going to be a walk in the park—“

“Don’t,” Loki muttered. “I know you’re only trying to be positive, but please don’t lie. Not to me, and not to yourself. It doesn’t help anything.”

Tony conceded the point.

“This is my fault,” Loki said darkly. “If I had not healed him—“

“Thanos has the Time Stone, he only went to Niðavellir because he knew he would be able to heal Eitri’s hands,” Tony interrupted, leaving no room for argument. “This would have happened with you or not. At least this way, you have a weapon that stops you from going insane from the Mind Stone.”

Loki’s gaze snapped up, and Tony let out a bitter laugh.
“What?” he asked. “You thought I hadn’t noticed? I know you struggled with that thing, and I know it’s been better since you got back from that place. If the price for you getting to keep your sanity was a short acceleration of our window to prepare, then I’m more than willing to pay it.”

“We’re not ready,” Loki said. The obvious follow up went unsaid, but it was written all over Loki’s face. *The price was too high.*

“No,” Tony said, both trying to counter Loki’s self doubt and agreeing with what he had said. Because Loki was right. They weren’t ready, and maybe they never would be, but Tony knew that there was not a single one of them that was about to roll over.

“It’s impossible to be ready for something like that,” Loki continued, mirroring Tony’s thoughts.

And Tony wanted to say something reassuring, but he knew Loki had been right before as well—they shouldn’t lie and give themselves false hope. But still, his body ached with the need to comfort, to just try and wipe that fear from his lover’s eyes. So Tony raised his hands, gently cupping Loki’s face.

“We’ve got a good chance,” Tony said. “Not what we had before he built a new Gauntlet, but better than the last time we saw him. *That’s* the truth.”

“I know.” Loki leaned into Tony’s touch. “But I…”

“I know,” Tony echoed.

Loki closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, and then before Tony knew anything else Loki’s lips pressed against his, quick and desperate, his kiss saying more than words ever could.

Despite the mess of people and planning they had managed a fair amount of time together in recent days, stealing what moments they could and clinging to each other to ride out the nightmares and make it through the nights. During the day they were often torn apart but made an effort to eat at similar times, to train together or conduct their various meetings in the same rooms when they could. They had made more of an effort to be together than they ever had in the past, and despite the reason for it and the fear of having it all torn away, Tony revelled in their closeness. Still, Tony knew that with everything coming it was never going to be enough for him— but it was certainly enough to fight for.

Just as with most things these days, their kiss didn't last as long as Tony would have liked, and Loki pulled back almost as suddenly as he had leaned in.

“He’s going to be here soon,” Loki said, his fingers gliding across Tony’s cheek, tips pressing hard but not enough to hurt.

“Yes,” said Tony, his own hands gripping Loki’s clothes. “He is. And ready or not, we’re going to give him a fight that he sure as hell won’t be expecting.”

When Loki nodded in agreement, his eyes were blazing with fierce determination.

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Tony shouldn’t have been surprised that it was Rhodie who called them all in for their next group training session, after having consulted with some of his old military buddies for tips. Steve was standing at Rhodie’s right during the impromptu gathering, and the fact that it was happening on the roof immediately had Tony on his guard.
The last training session that had started on the roof had gone relatively well, but if it went in the direction Tony suspected it would, then the world was probably about to learn of a chaos that it had never seen before.

Of course, Tony could be wrong—

“Hell yeah, capture the flag,” Clint cheered as he joined the group, punching the air. “This is going to be even better than last time.”

“Prepare to have your ass kicked one more time, old man,” Pietro said.

When neither Rhodey or Steve corrected them, Tony sighed.

He heard the explanation of course, the something something ‘good for morale’ something something ‘public image’ something something ‘teamwork’, but he was near overwhelmed with a mixture of excitement and dread.

“Its going to be tricky with so many of us now,” said Sam, glancing around the group and leaning up on his tip toes as if doing a count. Tony didn’t need to. He knew how many of them were currently taking up space in his tower.

Twenty-fucking-thirty.

He knew it was a good thing, really, that they needed the numbers. It was just hard to think that way when the line for the coffee pot was longer than one at Disney. For the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. On a public holiday.

In summer.

“I was thinking two teams, actually,” said Rhodey.

“Right, random teams, then,” Clint said immediately, probably remembering the conundrum of the last time. “That’s the only way to make this fair. So what’ll it be? Straws or names in a hat?”

“No,” said Rhodey. When every eye turned his way, he straightened and said– “We all know that we don’t have much time, so we need to get as much out of this as we can.”

While Thor and Loki had the most experience in terms of years, Rhodey was one of the only members on the team who had anything to do with the training of military forces. They all respected his experience, and even those who didn’t know him could tell that he seemed to know what he was talking about. Well, either that or they didn’t really care whether it was Steve or Rhodey that was coordinating their attempts at training cohesively.

“What do you have in mind?” asked Steve.

“Well, for starters, I want Loki on the opposite team to Thor,” he said. Thor began to protest, but Rhodey merely shook his head. “I know that you have been strained recently, but you have fought beside each other for centuries, you know each other well. But while you have fought each other for the past few years you have done so with intent. I want you to do it now while focusing on how to make each other better.”

While Loki’s expression had changed from slightly pleased to looking like he’d swallowed a lemon, Thor grinned bright enough to light the entire roof.

“Maximoff on the same team as Tony,” Rhodey added, and no one commented on that one— their
need to learn to work together seemed obvious. “Barnes and Rogers on opposite teams,” he said. “Okoye and T’Challa, opposite teams. Van Dyne and Lang, opposite teams.”

“We get it,” said Clint. “I need to go opposite Natasha. You’re splitting up the ones with the most experience fighting together, so we can learn to fight with other people just as well.”

“Not always,” Rhodey said, his eyes hardening without an ounce of amusement. “Tony and Loki need to be on the same team.”

There was a pause.

Then—

“No,” said Clint.

“Don’t you think they should learn to fight separately?” asked Natasha. She didn’t appear to be arguing— just honestly curious. “They’ve fought together several times now, they know each other well. Why split up most established teams but not them?”

“Because they don’t fight as a proper team,” Rhodey said. “I saw you in Central Park,” he continued, turning to rest his gaze first on Tony, then Loki. “I saw the way you both threw yourselves in front of Thanos to save each other, not thinking about how it could put yourselves or anyone else at risk.”

Loki cocked his head. “I thought watching each other’s back was an essential part of teamwork?” he asked, the sarcasm evident. “Or have I got that wrong?”

“I know you can fight well together, I know you’ve done it before,” Rhodey said patiently. “But you need to learn how to do so while trusting that everyone will do their jobs. If you jump in to save each other without thinking, you might miss that someone else was better placed, or that someone else needed your help more desperately.” He paused. “I know you, Tony, and I’ve seen Loki fight. I know you don’t want to see each other get hurt, and that might have been fine before— but in a larger group it’s going to hinder more than help.”

Tony fought not to lower his gaze. Rhodey knew him too well, and was calling him out on exactly what he had thought a few nights before while holding Loki in his arms. He would do anything to keep Loki safe, and that was exceedingly dangerous.

Love is the death of duty, Tony thought harshly. Sometimes, TV shows could be far wiser than they had any right to be— but Tony was adamant that this wouldn’t be one such incident.

“I’m not going to let a chance to kill Thanos pass me by,” Tony said. “I know what’s at stake.”

“Even if it were Loki’s head on the line?”

It was a lot to deal with, and especially at that time— just because Tony had accepted the necessity of Loki’s plan didn’t mean that he had accepted what it meant, what it might result in. And Tony knew what the correct answer to Rhodey’s question was— what it had to be. But that didn’t mean that he was capable of voicing it.

Thankfully, Rhodey shook his head before any sound escaped Tony’s throat. “It’s not fair of me to ask you that, I know,” he said. “And I’m sorry. But if it comes to that—”

“If it comes to that, Anthony will do what is right, as he always does,” Loki said harshly. “We all know what could happen in the coming battle, not one of us walked into this blind.”
“And if the situation were reversed?” Rhodey asked, turning on the god instead. “If Tony were in danger?”

“Then there would be no difference,” Loki replied simply, though he pressed his lips together tightly for a moment afterward, like the words had burned him on the way up. Then he added– “Though you cannot tell me that you could happily watch such a thing.”

“I wouldn’t,” Rhodey said, inclining his head. “But I’ve seen war, and I’ve had to make hard decisions in the past.”

“So have I,” Loki hissed. “It never gets any easier.”

“People have already died for this cause,” Tony cut in, his words thick but strong. “I won’t add to the list if I can’t help it, and I certainly won’t be letting it go past this fight.” He cast his gaze across the whole group. “You don’t need to worry about me. I won’t hesitate.”

Rhodey caught Tony’s eye, and a thousand words passed between them without the need to utter a single one. Tony knew that his best friend was pragmatic, and that while he understood, he also wanted Tony to accept what was realistic.

“Regardless,” Rhodey sighed. “Even outside Thanos getting his hands on either of you, you need to learn to allow others to step in. I know you do that with your other teammates, Tony,” he added, throwing that in before Tony could complain about being sold short, “but you– both of you, need to get it into your head that—“

“I watched Thor’s back for centuries,” Loki said. “The others tried, but they didn’t see as much as I did.”

“That is true,” said Thor. “Though I admit that I was often remiss in doing the same.”

Loki glanced down before saying– “You were there when you noticed something, brother. You saved me more than a handful of times.”

“And I will endeavour to help you through many more,” Thor vowed.

“Hopefully that won’t be necessary,” Tony muttered.

“Because everyone will be working together,” Rhodey stressed. “You’re going to be on the same team for this exercise, and you are going to work together while still working with everyone else.”

“We’ve got better at that,” Tony said, thinking of their last encounter with the Mad Titan. They had worked well together, then.

“I do mean everyone, Tony,” Rhodey repeated firmly. “We’re going to learn how to work as a team, and that means protecting the team as a whole. We can’t just split off into pairs.”

“Thanos will have seen you protecting each other,” Steve agreed. “He’s going to be expecting it.”

“I’ve told you before that I’m not going to stand by if Loki needs help,” Tony told them. “But I understand what you’re saying. We were all able to fight together in Central Park, even when some of us barely knew each other.” He glanced over at the Guardians. “We did well before, but this time, we need to do better than that.”

“That’s exactly what this is about,” Rhodey nodded. Then, thankfully, he finally got back to business, listing off teams that he thought would work well for the exercise while the others gave
helpful additions or suggestions. It was decided, for example, that T’Challa would work with Barnes, for they had begun to train together during their time in Wakanda and wanted to test their skill. They had grinned at each other when Rhody agreed, and Tony huffed with annoyance, realising that meant that he wouldn’t be on T’Challa’s team— for indeed, Rhody indulged by allowing Tony to go opposite Barnes. It also meant, though, that Tony would be with Steve, something that Tony was happy about.

“I don’t know you guys well,” Rhody said, his eyes skimming over Nebula and the Guardians. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“If you’re breaking up partners, Rocket and Groot need to split,” Quill said immediately.

“Then you have to put him with Stark,” Rocket shot back. “And split Drax from Mantis.”

“She is not my partner,” Drax said. “Though I would not to adverse to—“

“Hang on,” Tony started to complain at the same time, but—

“All right, that’s settled then. Moving on. Peter,” said Rhody. “You’re not going to be on a team.”

“I am not sitting this out,” Peter said quickly. “I’m good at this, you guys know I am. I found Loki’s flag last time, no one else came close—“

“You’re not going to fight in the desert,” said Steve. “Think about it, your webs won’t be as great an advantage on the flat terrain—“

“I can get around that—“

“We’re not saying you can’t join in on this exercise,” said Rhody calmly. “You need all the practice you can get.”

“But you don’t want me to fight Thanos,” Peter concluded, crossing his arms.

“You’re going to hold the fort here,” said Tony, stepping in. It was something he had thought about long and hard— not whether or not Peter should be allowed to fight, but rather how he would stop him from joining in. “While we’re in Nevada, you’re going to keep New York on its feet. You won’t be the only one— Daredevil will still be here—“

“Oh, you’ve spoken to him, have you?” Peter asked. “I thought he told you guys to piss off—“ Steve coughed loudly, and Peter rolled his eyes. “Come on, like you haven’t said worse.”

Tony isn’t ashamed to admit that he made use of copious guilt trips and bribery, for eventually Peter grudgingly agreed to stay in New York during the battle, recognising that it was an argument he was never going to win. Tony wouldn’t put it past the kid to try and sneak all the way to Nevada anyway, but the words at least gave him some level of comfort.

In the end, Tony was on a team with Loki, Steve, Natasha, Sam, Pietro, Okoye, Hope, Rocket, Drax, and Quill. The teams were even with eleven on each side, and Peter dancing the line in the middle with the instruction to cause as much chaos for everyone as he could. Tony thought Loki looked a little put out that he hadn’t been given that job, but at the same time he knew the god was just as determined as he was to prove Rhody wrong. He knew, of course, that his friend had a point, that he was going to have to sort out his priorities if he wanted to be of any use to the team.

That didn’t mean that it wasn’t hard.
That it wasn’t painful.

“If you come against someone, remember that this is still training,” Rhodey told them. “You want to beat them, yes, but the purpose is learning to work as a team. As you’re fighting, learn how they move, become familiar with their patterns.”

“And that’s the only rule?” Loki asked, his lips slowly turning up into a smirk.

“The team in possession of the other team’s flag at the end of the hour limit will be declared the winner,” said Steve, and Rhodey nodded in approval. “Other than that… well.”

“There are no rules in love and war?” Tony suggested.

Steve smirked. “Exactly.”

Natasha and Clint exchanged a glance that was downright deadly, while Loki looked almost as excited as he had when JARVIS had told him about April Fool’s day.

“And we’re playing for the ultimate prize, folks,” Rhodey added. “First choice of take out for the next month.”

“Hey, not fair,” Peter complained. “What do I—“

“Cause enough chaos to make me proud,” Loki told him, “And I will grant you a favour.”

Peter’s eyes widened comically, and Tony worried that Loki had just granted him too much power.

“So when do we start?” asked Rocket, rubbing the palms of his hands together. “I’m ready to show the people of this city what they’re missing out on by sticking only to this single planet.”

“Oh, we’re not training here,” Rhodey said, flashing them all a smile and gesturing to the quinjet. “I think we all need to acclimatise to where the fight is going to be happening, don’t you?”

Tony groaned, immediately recognising what was happening even before Steve confirmed it.

“Pack a bag, folks,” Steve said to them all. “We won’t be coming back for some time.”

—•—

It was a squishy and long trip to Nevada, one that Tony was very glad he managed to get out of. They took both a quinjet and T’Challa and Okoye’s Wakandan craft, but there was still a lack of space, and he, Rhodey, and Thor chose to fly the distance instead. Loki, the little shit, gave them all a jovial wave and told them he would meet them there before disappearing in a flash of green.

Tony had assumed that meant JARVIS would let Loki know when to head across. Nonetheless, when he landed and found that the army unit that had been asked to scout the area ahead of the battle had descended into absolute chaos while Loki looked on and cackled from the sidelines, he wasn’t entirely surprised.

“It was a training exercise,” Loki complained afterward as Thor physically dragged him into the command tent to apologise for the literally hundreds of snake illusions he had conjured. “I was only trying to help them.”

“And this was going to help our relations?” Tony asked Rhodey. “Are you sure this was the best idea?”
Rhodey sighed.

“We all need the practice,” Steve said, his voice bland with the air of a mantra. His pained expression made Tony glad all over again that he had managed to skip out on the jets.

It didn’t take long before the two Asgardians returned, an officer on their heels. The man, unsurprisingly, looked rather unimpressed with the proceedings, and Tony took a half step back so as not to have to be the spokesperson. Loki caught his movement and smirked, looking rather proud of the mess he had caused.

“Captain Rogers, Colonel Rhodes,” the officer said, offering them a firm handshake in turn. “And Mr Stark. My name is Colonel Sharpe, and I am currently in charge of this encampment. Thor has informs me that you are planning on staying here?”

“That is correct,” said Steve. “We need to be here to begin to coordinate, and to prepare for the attack.”

Sharpe’s eyes passed over the motley crew behind them, and Tony had to give the guy credit— he didn’t flinch at the various shapes, sizes, and colours. “I hope that you have brought enough resources,” he said gruffly. “I’m not feeding all of you.”

“There’s no need to worry about that,” said Rhodey. “Mr Stark has us covered. As Captain Rogers said, we’re not here to bother you. We’re here to help.”

“I understand that you are to be at the forefront of this defence,” Sharpe said, "but—"

“Offence,” Loki interjected.

The Colonel turned to him coldly, “Excuse me?”

“This is an offensive, Colonel,” Loki said, smiling almost patronisingly. “I went to great pains to arrange the time and place of this battle, and I assure you that even if this classifies as an invasion, we will be the attacking force.”

Sharpe narrowed his eyes. “That may be so,” he said, “but this is our planet, and we will be defending it with our lives.” He turned back to Steve and Rhodey. “I understand that you are taking point, but this is my camp, and these are my men. I will not tolerate any more…” his gaze slid to Loki. “Nonsense.”

“I prefer the term mischief,” Loki offered.

“No more,” he repeated firmly. Tony got the impression that the Colonel saw Loki’s relatively young face and underestimated him, forgetting that the man in front of him was a literal god. Sharpe was lucky that they were all on the same side, because underestimating Loki was usually the last mistake a person ever made.

Loki inclined his head, which satisfied the Colonel enough to turn back to the current pseudo leaders of their rag-tag force. But Tony caught the glint in Loki’s eye, and was absolutely certain that Loki’s nod hadn’t been a surrender. It was the acceptance of a challenge.

After that, Steve and Rhodey gave Sharpe the details they had and a brief overview of what they were planning to do with the rest of their afternoon. After a discussion heavy with military terminology they parted on good terms, though Sharpe shot Loki a final glare before he left.

“You can’t just go around terrorising the mortals,” Thor hissed at Loki as Sharpe went back to his
“Why not?” Loki complained. "Just because I agreed to be an Avenger doesn’t mean that I agreed to be boring."

“This is serious,” said Thor.

“I know that,” Loki shot back. “All the more reason to prepare them to face the unexpected, don’t you agree?”

Tony couldn't help but snicker at the pained expression on Thor’s face, though there was something in Thor’s gaze that softened the rest of it. It didn’t take an ounce of Tony’s genius to work it out. Loki hadn’t been as brash with Thor recently as he had been since Thanos had struck that killing blow, and Tony hoped that maybe he was beginning to work through everything that had happened.

With the army sufficiently informed, the Avengers were able to separate into their previously assigned teams, and then immediately split to choose their positions.

“Remember,” Rhodey reminded them as the teams began to disperse, Tony’s with a blue flag and the other with red. “We start in twenty minutes, and the exercise will last one hour.”

Tony was sure that Rhodey had set the time limit so short on purpose. It practically assured that they would all be reckless, that they would be pushed into taking desperate risks– something that likely would be impossible to avoid during the final showdown with Thanos, and therefore was something that they all needed to learn how to properly execute.

“Okay,” said Quill, the moment they were out of earshot. “I think we should—“

“Who put you in charge?” asked Hope.

“I am the captain of my ship,” Quill said.

“You were, you mean,” Tony pointed out, and Quill glowered.

“I think you’ll find that I was the captain of that ship,” Rocket muttered.

“It doesn’t matter, because Steve is the captain now,” Tony snapped.

“You don’t even have a title,” Quill taunted.

“I have three PhDs, thank you very much—“

“I don’t know what that means, that sounds made up—“

“We need to come up with a plan together—“ Steve started, but was cut off when Drax said–

“We don’t usually have plans. We just act.”

“Great,” groaned Sam.

“This is off to a remarkable start,” Loki commented. That, of course, led to more complaints and more squabbling and the fruits of Rhodey’s carefully arranged teams came into clear perspective as they all began shouting over each other, their personalities clashing in exactly the way Rhodey probably knew that they would.

Until—
“Silence!” Okoye snapped, glaring at them all. “You are achieving nothing. And besides— as a general, I outrank all of you.”

“Not me,” Loki muttered, but quietened when Okoye’s sharp gaze fell on him.

“Does anyone have anything of actual use to offer?” Okoye asked. “We are eating into our time.”

“I do,” said Hope. “I should go on the attack. If I can get in close enough, I can take their flag without them noticing, make it small—”

“Scott is probably suggesting the same thing right now,” said Natasha. “They’ll be expecting it. They won’t be expecting you to be defending our flag.”

“We need to play to our strengths without being obvious,” Steve agreed.

Loki nodded. “Thanos has had the opportunity to watch us fight,” he pointed out. “Especially those of you who fought the Chitauri in New York, and he will have heard of the Guardians. He will have already considered how to counter our attacks. As you say, Captain, we need to be fluid without being predictable.”

No one could deny that, and they moved on to a more civilised discussion.

In the past, Tony had always been one to think through his options on the fly, not exactly winging it but being flexible with opportunities that were presented in a fight. In recent years, though, Steve had drilled the team through forming a Plan A, a Plan B, a Plan C, going however far through the alphabet that was deemed necessary for a mission. Loki, on the other hand, preferred to weave complex webs, creating an intricate design that was incredibly adaptable and was impossible to predict— but also infeasible to coordinate with more than just himself. The Guardians, by their own admission, ‘don’t really do plans’, while Okoye stated that her Dora Milaje were well trained enough to coordinate as would a flock of birds, while Hope admitted that she had never worked with such a large group before.

With such a variety of preference and experience, it was incredibly difficult to accommodate everyone. But Tony supposed that was the whole point of the exercise, and in the end they came to a compromise.

The Avengers in the team, as well as Quill, Hope, and Okoye had a plan to follow. Rocket, on the other hand, while an important cog in the machine, had a little more agency in his part.

Still, Tony wasn’t entirely confident with it, and predictably their plan went to shit in the first five minutes.

*Play to our strengths without being obvious,* Steve had said. It was a good idea, but definitely not the one that the other team decided to go with, as Thor slammed into the ground in front of Tony’s team half a second after the twenty minutes was up, the air cracking with electricity.

Hulk ran after him, roaring up a storm as he charged forward.

“Diversion,” Loki said.

“Obviously,” Okoye agreed dryly.

“Right,” said Steve, raising his shield. “Let’s go.”

The first part of their plan was simple— Pietro had the flag, and he ran. There were no rules, no
boundaries—they were playing to their strengths, and Pietro was going to run as far and as fast as he could physically manage. Sam flew straight up and headed North, the direction that JARVIS told them the others had headed.

It was the next part that became the problem. Loki was meant to grab onto the rest of them, and move them to another location to mask their starting point, but they hadn’t counted on being found immediately. Before they could all get hold of the mage Hulk and Thor were on them.

Drax ran forward to meet the Hulk in excitement, and Steve ran after him. Loki managed to at least grab Quill and Rocket and send them on their way, but the rest were engaged in the fight. Thor laughed as he spun his hammer and nearly took Tony out with a heavy handed swing, which caused Loki to snarl and push his brother back with a shot of green seiðr.

Tony shot him a warning glare, and Loki huffed in annoyance and let Tony take the next blast of lightning full in the face.

“I don’t think that’s what Rhodey meant,” Tony complained. He’d had JARVIS split the usual comms into two channels for the exercise, and had promised Rhodey he wouldn’t listen in.

“I thought you liked getting hit by lightning,” Loki replied.

And, well, yeah okay, Tony liked the power up, since it let him blast Hulk away from where he had been gleefully (but gently) knocking around Drax, Steve, and Okoye.

Thor grinned as he rose up to meet him in the air. “We must remember that one, Stark, it is quite useful,” he said, before hitting him with the hammer once again and sending him careening back into the dirt.

Then an orange portal appeared in the middle of the fight, and Pietro sprinted out of it before skidding to a stop, panting hard and looking around in confusion.

Hope appeared a moment later. She had been with Pietro, small and hidden, an extra safety measure for if Pietro grew tired and someone managed to catch up to him. But what help could she have been against a portal?

“Not fair, Strange,” Tony muttered. But that was okay. They hadn’t planned for this, but Tony was an expert at going with the flow, and he knew that Loki would be right behind him.

He flew forward and grabbed the flag from Pietro before flying up and west, heading straight for the only place that gave him the chance of hiding. A few of the soldiers looked up with concern as Tony flew through their tents, and a few more ducked for cover. Tony headed for an area that mostly looked quiet, planning on finding a suitable hiding place for the flag.

He probably would have succeeded, too, if he hadn’t been side-swiped by an ungrateful kid in an outfit that Tony had personally made for him.

“I’m so sorry, Mr Stark,” said Peter, his voice cracking as he stared down at Tony struggling against the mess of webbing. “You know I didn’t have a choice.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, despite knowing that the kid wouldn’t see it.

Then the little shit snorted and broke down into giggles, and then gave Tony a mocking bow before ducking behind one of the tents.

It wasn’t the end of the world, though. He could probably cut through the webs if he arranged the
nanobots just right, and at least he still had the flag clenched in one hand.

Of course, then the flag shrunk before Tony’s eyes, and he watched as a tiny red figure grabbed the miniscule scrap of blue fabric before giving Tony a mocking salute and jumping off his arm and down to the ground.

How the—

Had he been hiding in Tony’s armour, or—?

“Hope, you’re up,” Tony groaned. “And I’m going to need a little help guys, I’m in a bit of sticky situation.”

“Tony,” said Steve, and Tony could hear him shaking his head in disappointment from across the desert. “This is exactly what we were not meant to be doing. Why did you go off on your own?”

It was probably for the best that Tony didn’t answer that question, he thought.

Tony saw a green flicker from the corner of his eye, and when Loki crossed into his line of vision he was wearing that one smirk that only ever meant trouble.

“Don’t you dare,” Tony complained. “This is all your fault anyway, you’ve given him way too much motivation. You’re such a bad influence.”

“And what does that make you?” Loki asked innocently. And the smirk might have been annoying, but at least Loki had the decency to get rid of the fucking webs.

Tony was just pulling the last of it from his suit when they heard a yell, and turned to see Scott and Hope appear. They were fighting hand to hand, and in a moments a silver-blue blur darted around them, probably looking for an opening.

Hope managed to give him one and Pietro was able to grab the blue flag just as an orange portal dropped off both Nebula and Barnes. At the sight of the orange sparks Pietro skidded to a stop, probably worried that the portal would drop him some where he didn’t want to be once again— but unfortunately, his hesitation only opened a window of opportunity for someone else.

The blue flag was caught by a string of white web, and Tony followed its trajectory as it was retrieved by the figure balanced precariously on top of one of the tents.

“You’re only meant to be causing chaos,” Tony complained.

“Cap and Mr Rhodey said there weren’t any rules,” Peter shot back, and then he was off.

Hope and Scott both vanished, becoming tiny once more, and Pietro moved to chase after Peter. But a small hand managed to catch him just before he vanished in a blur of speed, and—

“Sleep,” said Mantis.

Pietro dropped to the ground in an instant.

“Damn,” said Tony.

“Don’t worry, he will be okay,” Mantis assured him, probably misinterpreting his reaction. Then another portal appeared behind her, and she was gone as well.

“Just us, then,” said Nebula, drawing Tony’s attention back to the pair that had exited the portal.
“There’s no flag here,” Tony said, raising his hands. “Why don’t we all just go our separate ways?”

“Oh, we know,” said Barnes. “But we’re here to stop you, anyway.”

The only warning before they charged was Nebula’s gleeful smirk, and then Tony and Loki were fighting once more.

They fought together like a well-oiled machine, knowing each other well enough that they could predict each other’s moves and shift their own to accommodate. It was nothing like the way partners were often depicted in films, or even the way Tony had paired up with Rhodey or Steve in the past—they didn’t fight back to back, preferring to move fluidly and not be hindered by another’s proximity. Besides— Tony’s repulsors were long range, and Loki could teleport. They were perfectly able to watch each other’s back and stay in sync without needing to remain glued to the other’s side.

Loki managed to hold off Nebula with his daggers while Tony kept Barnes at bay, and then when Hulk roared in the distance and Nebula almost got inside Loki’s guard, Tony blasted in close and knocked her down while Loki danced to the side and caught Barnes in what looked like a paralysis spell.

It was clear that Barnes and Nebula had been paired together for their complementary skill set, and they were a deadly combination. But they couldn’t match the variety of what Tony and Loki were able to accomplish, for despite their differences they were able to meld their fighting styles and read each other perfectly. Barnes and Nebula didn’t know each other well enough, and it showed.

Despite the obvious hole in their overall defence that demonstrated, Tony grinned behind his mask and glanced to where his lover was standing some ten yards away. They really did make a good team.

Then there was another roar, much closer this time, and Hulk collided with Loki from the side before Tony even had the chance to blink. Hulk was standing over Loki, and although Tony knew that both his friends knew the other was not a threat, he could also see the nightmares swirling in Loki’s eyes despite the distance.

But—

Well, there was no one else around. Rhodey couldn’t begrudge him this one.

“No rules,” Tony muttered, and when he raised his hands they were glowing with a deeper blue than was normal for his repulsor blasts. He pushed all worries and concerns from his mind, remembering the confidence Loki had instilled in him with the Mind Stone the last time he had done this. Confidence was all in his head, anyway—he had done this before. He could do it again.

The blue portal seemed to swallow the Hulk whole before vanishing, and Loki was left to blink up at the sky in surprise.

Bruce would be all right. Tony wasn’t exactly sure where he’d sent the poor guy, but he was entirely certain that it was somewhere with cows. Hulk liked cows, and when Bruce woke up he’d be able to find a phone, at least.

A quick glance proved that Loki was already beginning to get back to his feet, so Tony turned his attentions back to Barnes. The man was helping Nebula to her feet— or, well, attempting to, since she glared at him with all the force of a thousand nuclear weapons as she shoved him to the side.

Either way, Tony didn’t want to waste time fighting them again. He felt like they’d all seen enough.
“Time to go?” Tony asked Loki. And Loki reached for his hand, but stopped when Nebula and Barnes stepped through yet another orange portal, and were replaced by Rhodey and the bloody wizard himself.

Loki and Tony exchanged a single glance before diving back into it, hardly needing anything else to know the other’s thoughts. Tony shot up into the air and fired a repulsor beam at Rhodey in the same moment. War Machine dodged it, but rather than returning fire he held up a hand.

“Wait,” said Rhodey. “I think we should watch this one.”

Tony barked a laugh even as he paused in the air beside his friend. “If you’re just trying to distract me—“

“Tony.”

Tony sighed, and nodded, but he silently instructed JARVIS to keep an eye on him.

Down below, the god and the wizard were standing some fifteen yards apart, taking stock of each other.

“Have you come to fight me?” Loki asked, his expression amused.

Without replying Strange raised his hands, bright orange symbols burning brightly in rings around each one.

Loki smirked, and vanished.

Strange wasted no time, throwing his arms out and exploding into dozens of copies of himself. They didn’t last long, though— the dozens of Stranges were met with dozens of Lokis, and dozens of daggers were shoved into their guts.

Only one of the Stranges managed to stop the blade by catching it in a snare of orange power, and the real Loki’s laugh sounded from everywhere as the illusions vanished and Strange was suddenly left standing alone— but again, not for long.

Loki was still laughing when he revealed his location as he threw a dagger at the wizard’s head. Strange managed to deflect it, and then he clapped his hands together and pulled them apart, a sparkling rope made of magic stretched between them. He threw it out like a whip, but it was caught with a flick of Loki’s wrist and then Loki used the connection to yank Strange off his feet and tumbling to the ground.

“We’re still splitting in pairs,” Rhodey said conversationally, though his helmet didn’t turn from the fight below. “You and Loki have stuck together—“

“Not at first,” Tony countered. “And we didn’t plan it, it just—“

“Yeah, I know,” Rhodey said. “But it’s not just you.”

“Your team put Nebula and Barnes together,” Tony commented.

“Strange was meant to keep us all linked up, but, with so many different people—“

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I know. It’s how I felt during New York– we’re all so different, how the hell is it meant to work? But, trust me— it’ll come.”

“We don’t have time for that.”
“No,” Tony agreed. “We don’t. But we’ll all still get there, because we have to.”

Rhodey’s head turned, then. “We’re not all Captain America and Thor,” he said.

“And thank god for that,” Tony muttered. Rhodey was probably about to say something along the lines of how he’d meant that not all people were the personification of a giant golden retriever who could make friends with anybody, but Tony’s attention was drawn back to the fight below.

“I’ve heard that you often invited yourself into my home while I was away,” Loki was saying. He had his sceptre out now, and was holding it loosely with both hands, the blade pointed upward. “Where I am from, that is considered rude.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Strange. “I thought Avengers Tower belonged to Stark, and I was under the impression that I was allowed to visit while helping the Avengers.”

“Helping?” Loki said, his voice curling around the word in an obvious taunt. “What help could you be?”

“I’m considered quite proficient at what I do,” Strange replied. “Something you’re about to find out.”

Loki flashed a wolfish grin. “Do you think you’re better than me, mortal?”

“No,” said Strange, pushing one hand forward to form another of his orange shields. “I just think you’re arrogant.”

Loki grinned and the tip of his sceptre glowed green, preparing to meet Strange head on. But then the bright red cloak rose from Strange’s shoulders and twisted around Loki’s, locking his arms against his sides. Loki snarled and struggled, but the cloak held firm.

Suddenly, as if he had been waiting for a cue, Rhodey turned and blasted Tony with a repulsor. If JARVIS hadn’t taken control of the suit and hauled him out of the way, it probably would have hurt.

“So much for watching,” Tony complained. Rhodey laughed, and shot him again.

When it came to planes, no one could fly better than Rhodey– but Tony had made the Iron Man armours, and he knew how to make them sing. Of course, he’d also made sure that JARVIS had access to every suit that he had ever made, and it took only a simple command for the AI to fly Rhodey to the ground and make the suit go dark.

It was hardly cheating, and JARVIS would make sure the suit went back on line after a little while. And besides, with Rhodey down, surely no one could begrudge him if he went to give Loki a hand, right?

Except—

“We need back up,” Steve said, his voice coming in loud and clear over the comms. “Drax and I need—” Steve cut off, and JARVIS immediately relayed his location.

Even in that safe environment it was fucking hard, but Tony forced himself to turn away from where Loki seemed to be losing the fight with Strange and fly in the direction JARVIS indicated.

As he grew closer, Tony thought he could see Drax with a couple of other figures and maybe Sam a little ways away, but what concerned him was the blue-clad figure lying prone on the ground. He touched down beside him as quick as he could, slightly concerned despite knowing that no one would have seriously hurt him– but the concern melted away before JARVIS had even finished his
assessment of Steve’s condition.

Steve was asleep.

*Slacker.*

“Mantis was here,” Tony said to the others. “She got Steve, I don’t know where she is now. Guys?”

“She just put Drax down, too,” said Natasha. “But don’t worry, she’s out now.”

“Do I want to know?” he groaned.

“I didn’t zap her,” Natasha replied. “Falcon tied her up.”

“And she nearly got me, too,” Sam complained, joining in. “It’s always the– oh for the– kid, leave me alone!”

Well, Tony supposed, at least they knew where Peter had gone.

“Sam, Peter’s got our flag somewhere,” Tony told him.

“I’m a bit tied up now, to be honest,” Sam groaned. “Widow, how far away are you, now?”

“I’ve got you,” Loki said, joining the conversation. “Where is the Falcon, JARVIS?”

“What about Strange?” asked Tony after JARVIS relayed Sam’s location.

“He’s a bit tied up too,” Loki replied smugly. “A Midgardian sorcerer is no match for me in a fair fight.”

“Bet it wasn’t fair,” said Natasha.

“Exactly,” Loki said smugly.

Tony left Steve on the ground, not sure that there was anything else to do with him. He knew that Mantis’ power didn’t last too long– he just hoped that the man didn’t get sunburnt.

He turned his nose toward the direction their team had – with the two exceptions – collectively decided to avoid until the end of the exercise. There was only ten or so minutes left, after all, and since Peter had their flag there was no point in dancing around any longer.

“Guys, we’re just going to have to go on with the attack,” he said. “Rocket, Quill, how’s it going on your end?”

“We’re in place,” said Rocket. “They haven’t noticed us, there’s no one here.”

Tony paused. “No one?”

“Nope,” said Quill. “It’s a bit suspicious, thought it might be a trap. Thought we’d best wait for you guys.”

“That was the plan, anyway,” Tony said drolly. Then, “All right. I’m on my way.”

Loki, Sam, and Pietro all chimed in with an affirmative, though Natasha said she was currently busy with T’Challa, and Okoye let them know that she would be there as soon as she had dealt with the ‘pest with a bow’. Tony realised that someone was missing, and called again for hope.
“Sorry everyone,” she answered reluctantly. “The tree got me, I’m stuck. Scott’s out too, though.”

They had agreed to go on the defensive in the beginning, because the team only had to be in possession of the opponent’s flag at the end of the hour to win. JARVIS could track War Machine easily, and he had found the coordinates of their flag before the exercise had even officially started. If they stole it early and it was stolen back, they may not find it again— it was safer to simply leave it where it was and collect it at the end.

Tony almost collided with Thor en route, and reacted quickly, deciding to use the same tactic that he had with the Hulk, the Stone responding almost eagerly, now. It was quite satisfying watching Thor’s surprise as he realised what was happening just before the portal swallowed him whole.

_Ha,_ Tony thought. _No pot shots with the hammer this time._

He was sure Thor wouldn’t be angry about it— he would just be able to fly back, after all.

When Tony finally reached the area JARVIS had specified, he saw that Quill and Rocket were right— there was no one guarding the spot, which, yes, was entirely suspicious. The only person in sight was Pietro, who was standing some yards from the flag and rubbing at his forehead as if trying to remove a headache. Still, seeing the red flag out there in the open, with nothing or no one around it was incredibly tempting. It was difficult to resist.

“Stark, wait!” Pietro called, but Tony kept flying— he was so close, the flag was practically in his grasp—

And then he collided with something solid and invisible, and hit the ground with a crash.

“So,” said Pietro, audibly annoyed. “There is some kind of shield. Listen next time, maybe.”

“Yeah,” Tony groaned, pulling himself up off the floor. “Okay. Lesson learned.”

Rather than turning to the rest of his team, he began to initiate a scan. He heard others approaching from behind, but they made no attempt to stop him as he stepped forward to examine the shimmering shield in front of him. It was a dome, with a radius of about three metres spanning out from the red flag in all directions— or perhaps from the silver-grey box the flag rested atop of. It seemed similar to the orange shield that had lined the cells in Asgard’s dungeon, though this one was coloured blue and far more transparent, visible only when something touched it or if you knew to look. It didn’t seem as strong as the Asgardian shield either, though certainly stronger than the one Tony had encountered at the HYDRA base in Sokovia.

Pietro muttering a curse had Tony glancing up, and as he watched, Sam dove down and flew into the shield as well.

“Ow,” Sam groaned as he, too, was forced to pull himself off the ground.

“There’s a shield there,” Tony told him, hardly glancing his way.

There was a pause, and then—

“You definitely need to work on communication,” Okoye said bluntly as she reached them. There was a tear in the side of her uniform and she, like the rest, looked like she had taken a dust bath, but otherwise she remained impeccable.

Loki stepped up beside Tony and raised his hands, not pressing his palms to the shield but coming close as he frowned in concentration.
“Strange?” Tony asked. Even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t true—JARVIS had already relayed the very familiar readings. Familiar, but not in a manner that made any sense.

“This is not of magical origin,” said Loki, lowering his hand, his frown deepening. “I could destroy it by pushing through with a blast of seiðr, but you will have more luck taking it down, I think.”

“Try,” Tony told him firmly, even as he stepped closer to prepare to have a go himself. But, as it turned out, neither of them were given the chance to try.

“Nope, time’s up,” said Rhodey. He landed beside them and pulled back his helmet just to display his wide grin.

Rhodey’s arrival seemed to be a signal for all the others, and they all began to filter back in. Someone must have released Strange, for he did most of the ferrying, orange portals bringing them all back to the red flag from all over the desert. Steve was one of the last, looking a little pink from his time lying on his back in the sun, but otherwise seemed all right. Mantis arrived with him—she must have woken him before converging on the final flag.

“This was hardly fair,” Pietro said, gesturing to the shield. “We couldn’t get to it—“

“Face it,” said Barnes. “You’ve lost.”

“Suck on that,” Clint crowed.

“Doesn’t this mean I won?” asked Peter waving his captured blue flag around. Tony narrowed his eyes at it. “I stole this fair and square, which I’m pretty sure caused chaos.”

Clint looked about to retort but was interrupted when a large pile of shrubs shuddered.

“Aw, man,” Quill complained, crawling out with Rocket on his heels. “This is what happens when we let the Terrans make the plans.”

“You are Terran, Quill,” said Rocket.

Clint stared at Rocket for a moment before asking, "Is that a bomb?"

Rocket shrugged, glancing down at the device in his hands. “You guys said there were no rules.”

“Where did you even get a bomb from?” Sam asked worriedly. “You didn’t have one before.”

Rocket’s lips pulled back over his teeth in a truly terrifying grin.

“Rocket was in charge of making the distraction,” said Tony, almost absentmindedly. Then he frowned, and looked over to them. “Hey Rocket, is this shield something you’ve seen before?”

“Maybe,” said Rocket. “I couldn’t say for sure without looking properly, but I don’t think anyone in our group is capable of making it, if that’s what you’re asking.”

"Gee, thanks," said Quill.

“If it wasn’t Strange, it wasn’t the Guardians, and I know that this is not my tech,” Tony asked, glaring around them all. “Then who the hell designed this shield?”

There was a moment of silence.

Then, T’Challa started to laugh— not his usual refined chuckle but honest to god guffaws, cackling
and bending over at the middle as he wiped tears from his eyes.

Okoye muttered something under her breath in isiXhosa before switching back to English and saying, “I did not realise she was coming so soon.” She glanced to T’Challa with not quite a glare, but rather something incredibly exasperated, like she had never expected anything less. “A little warning would have been nice.”

“But that would have ruined our advantage in the game,” T’Challa replied, offering Barnes a high-five.

“You’re saying this is Wakandan tech?” Tony asked, his eyes widening as he wondered why he hadn’t thought of it before.

The answer didn’t come from either T’Challa or Okoye, but from a new voice.

“Yes.”

Tony’s gaze snapped to the speaker to see a teenaged girl standing on the other side of the domed shield. There was no indication of where she had come from, and her trendy white jacket and black jeans were free from desert dust, while her hair was in intricate, undisturbed braids. She crossed her arms as Tony appraised her, raising her chin as if expecting a denial of her capability to create such a thing as the shield before them.

As if Tony could be anything other than in complete and utter awe.

“You have got to show me how you built it,” Tony said immediately.

The girl changed tack immediately, her lips curling into a smirk.

“Oh?” she asked, tilting her head and raising her brows in faux incredulity. “Don’t you have force-fields in America?”
Worst is the waiting

Chapter Summary

Tony opened his mouth to respond, but got no further than that before Loki dropped his hands and snapped—

"If you tell me that you're fine, I will instruct JARVIS to give you only cold showers for a month when we return to the Tower!"

Chapter Notes

yep, don't mind me, here I am adding more characters because it's not like I had ENOUGH ALREADY

The universe could go to shit, hell could freeze over, the sun could rise the west and set in the east, the mountains could blow in the wind like leaves while pigs flew in the sky and yet still the fact that Einherjar had shitty timing would always remain constant.

Honestly. It was like they had a radar or something.

Not, Tony felt the need to mentally add, that he was complaining about their presence entirely. As much as he disliked them he couldn’t deny that they would be a welcome addition in the fight to come, and he was grateful to them for their assistance.

But he was not entirely pleased with the fact that they interrupted his conversation with Princess Shuri of Wakanda, who was honestly one of the most truly brilliant people Tony had the pleasure of meeting– and he’d travelled in scientific circles that oozed with genius his entire life.

And it wasn’t just her intelligence– it was the way her whole expression lit up as she spoke in terms that had everyone else’s eyes glazing over, the way she could keep up with Tony’s questions and never asked him to repeat anything, and the way she giggled at Tony’s technology – technology that, until Wakanda had stepped out of the shadows, had been the most advanced on the planet – like it was a high school science fair entry.

Tony couldn’t wait to introduce her to Bruce.

Shuri was just answering one of Tony’s detailed questions about the mechanics of creating a force-field large enough to protect an entire city that still wouldn’t buckle under pressure – the secret, apparently, was to make it flexible, something that Tony was kicking himself for not coming up with before – and T’Challa and Okoye were greeting the rest of the Dora Milaje who had arrived with Shuri on an invisible plane when the desert exploded in a wash of bright light that shone with the entire spectrum of colour. When the light dimmed back to only the average level of blinding for a desert in the summer, the usual round landing pattern was burned into the ground. Atop it stood a rather substantial unit of Einherjar, the sun glinting obnoxiously from their golden armour.
“Shall I blast them, Sir?” JARVIS asked, speaking quietly from Tony’s phone. “Just say the word.”

Loki snorted.

“Now *that’s* an entrance,” Shuri said, awed. Then she looked to Tony. “How does that thing work, exactly?”

“Well—“ Tony started, but was interrupted when Thor said–

“It’s an Einstein-Rosen Bridge.” He gave Tony a smug grin, as if saying *ha, look, I listened to Jane’s science talk.* Then, turning to his troops, he boomed— “My friends!”

For a moment, Tony wondered at the greeting – surely even in Asgard it was strange to claim a whole army who had been hunting his brother not months before as his friends– but not for long. He knew that Thor was boisterous and probably considered every creature who had never tried to kill him (and even a few who had) to be his friend. Maybe that was Thor’s doctrine, *friend until proven completely and irredeemably evil.* Maybe having Loki as a brother had desensitised him. But then a pair of warriors that Tony recognised from descriptions stepped out from the group, and it all made a lot more sense.

“Thor!” The woman – dark haired, sharp faced, clad in armour with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other – came forward first, her lips pulled back in a smile. “It is good to see you well.”

“Very good, indeed,” said the man, joining her. He was fair-haired, with a golden goatee and a friendly smile. He walked with half a limp, probably imperceptible to most, but Tony had spent far too long now searching out other people’s weaknesses to miss it. “We heard that you had been injured.”

“For a time, but the mighty Doctor Strange healed me,” Thor told them. “I am all right, now. Thank you for coming.”

“We have come to avenge our shield-brothers who fell fighting Thanos,” said Sif. “He will suffer for what he did to the Allfather, to Hogun and Volstagg, and to the rest of the brave warriors of Asgard.”

“Then you’ve definitely come to the right place,” Tony quipped. “*We are* the Avengers, after all.”

Sif looked down her nose at Tony, her eyes narrowing. The expression wasn’t anything so strong as contempt, because that would imply at least a respect for Tony’s existence. No, she looked at Tony like he was nothing more than an insect, a mere irritation that didn’t deserve any more of her attention than a dismissive flick.

Indeed, when she spoke, she turned to Loki– and although she at least acknowledged him, it was clear that she held no respect for him either. If Tony was an annoyance, Loki was a blemish.

“This is the mortal you chose?” she asked, her brows arching in clear judgement. “The one you gifted with stolen fruit?”

Loki nodded, not rising to the bait.

“Then *I* am very pleased to meet you,” said Fandral, cutting across Sif’s next remark and thrusting out his hand, fingers slightly curled and elbow bent sharply.

Tony recognised the gesture, and grasped Fandral’s forearm with a grin. “It’s nice to meet such a decent Asgardian,” he said.
Fandral barked a laugh, not missing a beat. “I can see why Loki likes you.”

Sif looked ready to say something else, but Thor caught her gaze sharply. It seemed like something passed between them, a reminder of a previous conversation, perhaps, and then she swallowed hard and turned to Tony once again.

“Are you the leader of the Midgardians, then?” she asked.

Tony shook his head. “We don’t have just one leader,” he told her.

“That seems inefficient,” Sif replied.

Tony snorted. “You know, Loki said almost exactly the same thing.”

This time, Sif did a better job of keeping her derision hidden. “Loki has always been well versed in politics,” she admitted.

It was only because Tony knew him so well that he could sense Loki’s surprise at the compliment.

“Of course, he then tried to take up the job for himself,” Tony continued. “Inadvisable, by the way. I mean, even if he’d succeeded— imagine how much work it would be.”

“If it were for the good of my people, I would shoulder whatever responsibility is required,” Sif said tightly. Then she looked to Loki and added, “As I am now. I know that we have had our differences, but I know that you were right, when we spoke on Asgard.”

This time, even the others could see Loki’s surprise, and Sif smirked even as he replied.

“You understand the importance of this fight, then?” he asked.

“I understand that Thor will fight with the mortals,” she said quickly. Then she sighed. “I also understand that if Midgard falls, we will not have a hope of survival. This is where the fate of the Nine Realms will be decided, and I am going to be here to make sure that the Norns spin it in our favour.”

Loki acknowledged her words with a terse nod of his head, and then Thor lead her and the head of the Einherjar over to meet with Colonel Sharpe. Fandral paused before following.

“It’s good to see you again, Loki,” he said.

This time, Loki’s nod was somewhat friendly.

“Well, he doesn’t seem so bad,” said Peter, stepping up beside Loki.

“I don’t think they look like gods,” said Shuri, tilting her head with a frown and ignoring her brother’s gracefully executed facepalm entirely. “I thought gods were meant to be taller.”

“I think that’s why they wear such big hats,” Peter suggested, gesturing to the Einherjar. “So they look as tall as the stories say they are.” When Shuri laughed, he grinned at her and said, “I’m Peter, by the way.” Tony glared at him. “Erm, I mean. Spider-Man. But you can call me Peter. Just don’t tell anyone normal.”

“Dude, how old are you?” asked Shuri.

Peter looked at her in surprise. “Well,” he said, “As far as the army are concerned—“
“He’s the same age you are,” T’Challa cut in.

“Oh good,” said Shuri. “I doubted that there would be anyone here under forty, but I’m glad to be proven wrong.” T’Challa scowled, and Shuri immediately added, “You have an old soul, brother, admit it.”

“That’s usually a compliment,” T’Challa complained.

“Not the way I say it,” Shuri teased gleefully.

“Are you here to help fight?” asked Peter. Tony could already see the gears turning in his head, and was infinitely glad when T’Challa immediately said—

“She is not.”

“Actually, I am so,” Shuri argued. “Who was it that just won that game of capture the flag?”

“You’re too young,” T’Challa argued. “Peter is being sent back to New York as well.”

Peter and Shuri huffed in exactly the same way.

Teenagers, Tony thought, and suddenly he felt impossibly old.

“You need to go somewhere safe,” T’Challa added.

“I have just as much right to be here as you do,” Shuri shot back. “More, even. Those are my shields that are going to win the fight—“

“And you do not need to be here to operate them.”

“What if they fail?”

“Then it will be too dangerous—“

“Let me fight, brother! This is the whole world, and you know it!”

The king sighed, and in that moment, he really did look ten years older.

“Shuri,” he said, “I will let you stay if you can answer one question to my satisfaction.” Shuri straightened with the confidence of a person who had never failed a test in their life, but her expression fell at T’Challa’s next words. “If something happens to me in this fight… what happens to Wakanda?”

“All right,” she said, visibly deflating. She hadn't even considered his meaning for long, but if anything that simply raised Tony’s opinion of her further. “But you better not die, brother. I can’t deal with that much responsibility at my age, it’s bad for my self esteem.”

T’Challa rolled his eyes. “I think your self esteem is fine,” he said. “Ayo will accompany you and Peter back to New York once your shields are built.”

“How long until the alien comes?” asked Shuri.

“Just under two weeks, now,” Loki told her.

“Then my shields are going to take a week and a half,” Shuri smiled brightly at her brother, and then held out a hand to Peter. “Care to show me around, Spider-Man?”
“That friendship is going to end in at least one explosion,” said T’Challa, patting Tony on the shoulder as he moved to rejoin Okoye and her comrades. “Good luck, my friend.”

After indulging the brief surge of excitement at having been referred to as T’Challa’s friend, Tony thought that he felt the appropriate amount of concern over his prediction. Loki, though, lit up with expectant delight, and Tony made a solemn mental note to keep him away from the pair of teenagers. An explosion or two was all well and good, but they wanted the encampment intact at least until Thanos arrived, after all.

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The Wakandans and the Asgardians set up their own camps beside the army’s, and the encampment would only continue to grow.

Not long after the Avengers joined the camp, General Ross arrived with an entourage of yet more military, and in only a few days the once peaceful Mojave Desert was looking more and more like an encampment from a high fantasy novel. There were soldiers of different species mingling – if not happily, then at least amicably – and the various groups seemed mostly willing to share their skills and methods with the others.

A quick training scuffle between the Einherjar and the Dora Milaje was one of the best things Tony had seen in a while, especially since it ended with Thor and Sif shouting at the head of the Einherjar, who Loki said was named Tyr. Loki, in particular, seemed to enjoy the spectacle.

Strange’s wizards were, well. Strange was probably the most normal out of all of them, to be honest, and thankfully they all kept to themselves.

Of course, it was when the Chinese contingent showed up that things became even more tense— they had all been expecting them, of course, and while America had fought with allies in past wars, every person present was aware that their arrival was the beginning of something even larger. Something unprecedented.

“What’s going on, Mr Stark?” Peter asked, wide eyed as he watched the Chinese General speak with Ross.

“For once in our lives,” Tony said, his tone laced with awe, “politics is actually working in our favour. Thank fuck for the Avengers’ Accords.”

It was something that Tony never thought he’d hear himself say, but there he was. One hundred and seventeen countries had signed the Accords, along with the Avengers themselves, and the off-worlders (including the Guardians, and Thor and Loki) had signed it as well. The Accords meant that the Avengers needed permission to go on missions that involved entering other countries, they needed to inform the Council of their movements, they needed to let General Ross into their home, and a whole list of other things they would rather not have to do. At times it felt like a noose around their neck, even though Tony’s lawyers had assured him that it protected the Avengers from prosecution they would have been open to before the Accords came into fruition. Like code of conduct documents and health and safety waivers, the Accords were a safety net of bureaucracy that wouldn’t be required in a perfect world, a political move that protected both the team and the national interests of the signatory countries at the price of limiting the Avengers’ freedom.

But if it tied the Avengers’ hands then it also tied the hands of those one hundred and seventeen countries— one hundred and seventeen countries that were now obliged to send what aid they could to help defend the planet.
Of course, the military of most nations were too small to offer substantial help, and the USA have one of the biggest armies in the world. Many countries offered their services by making their own people ready for attack on their own soil, but those who could sent men and machinery. Those that had active space programs loaned their satellites and analysts to the cause, turning various remote sensors, imaging technologies, and communications arrays toward the stars. With the combined intelligence of the world’s experts and with the added help of a reluctant Erik Selvig, who had been recruited by Thor, Earth would be given an early warning when Thanos approached.

The government, of course, were not particularly happy with the thought of letting the military forces of the entire world into their borders, but President Ellis gave a speech about bravery and the fight for freedom that roused the people toward the cause—though the fact that Steve was standing beside him when he did so doubt helped smooth the matter over.

As a matter of fact, Tony was a little in awe of Steve, and he doubted that they would have been able to pull it off without him, Accords or not.

Not all was easy, you see. There were a few divides between camps that had history, though Tony noticed they were generally enforced by the officers rather than upheld by the soldiers themselves. Politics, old rivalries and centuries-old hatreds didn’t just vanish overnight, and the humans and Asgardians were still wary of each other, yet they were all there. Ready to fight to defend their homes, to avenge fallen comrades, to protect the population of the entire universe. They were all that stood between Thanos and countless deaths, and while it was a huge responsibility to shoulder, every single person there was willing to do what was right.

An inevitable consequence of their diversity, though, was that the command meetings were incredibly long, sophisticated, and difficult. The armies were all fighting for the same cause but reluctant to hand over responsibility or strategy to those they had fought against in the past.

That was when Steve began to work his magic. (Not actual magic, of course. God, with all the magicians around Tony was going to have to watch his vocabulary.)

It seemed strange that military leaders from countries all across the globe could respect a man dressed in stars and stripes who had been dubbed Captain America— a picture that outside the present time would have seemed entirely ludicrous. But Steve had a manner of speaking that drew people in. His words had a brutal, raw honesty to them that moved mountains and convinced old enemies to work together for the greater good, and after a firm conversation with him that left everyone feeling equally guilty and inspired and left no one willing to back out, even Russian and American officers were shaking hands and discussing strategy over a hot mug of burnt coffee.

A common enemy and a threat to the planet really did bring people together. Who knew?

Still, it was easy to see that there were trust issues and concerns over whether they would all be able to fight as a group, and whether their completely divergent fighting styles could ever be reconciled into one, united force. Rhodey tried to point out that the Avengers had fought alongside the army to a positive result in Central Park, but the others were quick to counter with the fact that the Avengers were an American-based team fighting alongside an American army.

In the end, it was Peter who suggested the bonding exercise, though Tony knew that Princess Shuri would claim at least half of the credit, for it was her sarcastic remark that gave him the idea in the first place.

The third game of capture the flag was an event that would be retold to grandchildren for generations to come. It was an epic battle fought between the Einherjar and the combined armies of Earth against the Avengers and their newfound comrades. All of Earth’s Mightiest Heroes in one
place, accompanied by a army of Asgardians, a handful of insane Guardians of the Galaxy, and a
group of wizards whose fashion sense had stagnated somewhere in the 15th century. (Although,
Tony supposed, the wizards counted as Earthlings as well.)

The fight was looking like it might end in a draw – a remarkable feat for either side depending on
how you looked at it – when a helicarrier descended from the sky, its retro-reflective panels
shimmering as a few quinjets and an impossible number of agents scattered down across the
battlefield, breaking the stalemate.

When Nick Fury managed to tear down the magical barrier with a blast from a Destroyer Armour
Gun and grabbed the Avengers’ flag, Tony landed next to a frustrated Loki and removed his helmet
in shock.

“Son of a bitch,” Tony said.

“You didn’t think we’d let you have all the fun, did you?” asked Fury, smirking with more
amusement than he had any right to possess, considering that—

“We thought you were dead,” Tony snapped.

“You should have known better than that,” Fury said. His gaze moved to the side, and Tony turned
to see Natasha matching Fury’s amusement, and Steve looking a little sheepish. A few others had
joined them as well, including Secretary Ross, who was turning a truly unnatural shade of purple.

“I called him,” Steve admitted. “And before you say anything, I know; and I’m sorry. But he made
me swear—“

“I don’t blame you, Steve,” Tony said, turning his glare on Fury. “You should have trusted me.”

“I couldn’t,” Fury said. “Not until I was sure that I could trust him.” As he spoke, Fury jabbed his
finger toward Loki.

“He’s done more for this planet in the last few years than you have,” Tony said immediately.

“Are you sure about that?”

Tony tensed, but stopped when Loki’s fingers flickered slightly in his direction. It was a small
gesture, less noticeable than a nod of the head or a touch to the arm, yet Tony knew what it meant.
Fury watched the proceedings curiously, though he didn’t appear surprised by anything. He didn’t
comment on that, though.

“I heard you were here to help defend our planet,” said Fury, his single eye assessing Loki critically.

Loki nodded. “I am,” he said simply.

Fury still looked sceptical, but then another voice chimed in.

“I saw him in Central Park,” Agent Hill said, appearing from amongst a bunch of agents Tony half
recognised and giving Loki an approving nod.

The reminder had Tony jerking where he stood– that was right, wasn’t it? Hill had been in Central
Park, with nothing but a flimsy explanation and a sharply honed skillset. Huh. It seemed like the
impending showdown had every little critter crawling out from the woodwork.

Unaware of Tony’s thoughts, Hill concluded her short evaluation. “You shouldn’t worry, there’s no
way Loki’s with Thanos.”

That, it seemed, was that. Fury trusted Hill more than he seemed to trust any of the rest of them, and Tony was willing to bet that most of it was a front anyway—there was no way Fury could have missed the news of Loki joining the Avengers, no matter which rock he’d been hiding himself under for the past four years.

And yeah, wow.

Nick Fury.

Alive.

The world had gone insane, for sure. Maybe Sif’s hopes were true, and the Norns really were beginning to tilt the scales in their favour.

With the success of the game and the little that was left of SHIELD now onside, the morale in the camp began to rise. The exercise had proven that they could fight together, that they were capable of coming up with plans and counter plans despite their differences.

Thanos would come and bring with him the power of four Infinity Stones and an army of Outriders and Chitauri. He could come with violence and treachery and everything he had, but he would not be expecting what awaited him.

Thanos would come, and they would be ready.

This time, Earth had a force to be reckoned with.

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Tony became aware of Loki’s concern during lunch on a... a Thursday, maybe? He had admittedly lost track of the days, knowing only that they had less than a week until the approximate date Loki had given for Thanos’ arrival was upon them.

He had spent the morning with Shuri and Rocket and a team of army engineers from various countries who really did try their hardest to keep up, working out the best position for the planned Wakandan force-fields. Tony could have worked through the day with a single minded focus, but Okoye, Loki, and Groot had made a truly terrifying team as they dragged their respective charges to eat when the bells rang midday.

Lunch was some kind of slop the army had provided that actually didn’t taste half bad despite the way that Loki dryly compared it to Bilgesnipe vomit. Steve and Barnes were on the other side of the picnic-style-bench from the pair, discussing how much army food had improved since the 1940s.

And Tony was fine.

He focused on his food, and carefully made sure that he was involved in the conversation, agreeing with Steve when he thought it appropriate, and even adding a quip about the possible type of meat in the stew. He may have gripped his spoon a little too tight, and maybe he spilled his water when Barnes reached across him for the saltshaker Steve had brought from Avengers Tower.

But he was fine. He didn’t freeze, and he didn’t leave. He made it through the entire meal without cracking. He thought he’d done pretty well, actually, and when Loki led him away from the others the moment he had finished eating, Tony jumped to quite the wrong conclusion.
“As much as I would love a quickie right now,” Tony said, “Shuri promised that she would let me watch her wire together the control panel, and—“

“I want to talk to you about Barnes,” Loki said, jumping straight to the point.

Tony swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry despite the stew he’d just eaten. “Oh,” he said.

“You can’t keep doing this to yourself—“

“Don’t worry,” Tony said. “Maximoff already spoke to me about this. I know that I need to get a grip, okay?”

“What?” Loki frowned. Tony had hoped that the assurance that he had already talked about it with someone would ease Loki’s concern, but it only seemed to make it worse. “When was this?”

“Back in the Tower,” Tony said, matching the frown, though his was more of confusion than worry. “Does it matter?”

Loki shook his head. “You have just… you’ve been acting differently around Barnes, recently. More tense.”

Tony glanced away, unable to hold Loki’s gaze. “Sorry,” he said. “I’ve been trying, I promise. It’s hard, but I haven’t been leaving when he joins a conversation, and I—“

“Forcing yourself to suffer isn’t going to fix anything,” Loki interrupted.

“This coming from the absolute expert in avoidance,” Tony drawled. “Remind me how well that worked for you?”

It seemed that it was Loki’s turn to look away, then, and Tony regretted it immediately.

“Sorry,” he said again. “I didn’t mean—“

“I know,” Loki cut in, his gaze flashing back up to meet Tony’s apology. “But this is exactly what I’m trying to say. You’re forcing yourself to withstand it without taking the time to work through what you need to. It’s just as bad as avoiding things, and you are right. I know what happens then better than anyone.”

“I’m not going to try and enslave an entire planet as a coping mechanism,” Tony tried, and Loki rolled his eyes.

“Maybe not, but you’re not going to get any better, either,” he said. When Tony didn’t respond, Loki sighed heavily and ran a hand through his hair. “What did Maximoff say? It’s not like you to let another effect you so.”

“He said that I need to get my head in the game,” Tony recited. “That it’s more important for me to see past what Barnes did than to waste the time trying to move past it.”

“He had no right to say that to you,” Loki said, his tone sharp yet somehow managing to comfort Tony at the same time. Yet Tony couldn’t reconcile the sentiment with everything that was swirling through his mind.

“He was right though,” he argued. “We don’t have time to be sentimental.”

“No,” Loki agreed. “We don’t, but we do have the time to get your head sorted out properly, to stop you from hurting yourself. Anthony, you can work with Barnes already. I know that you can
because you did in Central Park, and you didn’t so much as flinch when we saw him during the flag game.” He raised his hands to cradle Tony’s cheeks between his palms, forcing Tony to hold his gaze. “You can do this, it’s not going to affect the fight. But it is going to affect you.”

Tony opened his mouth to respond, but got no further than that before Loki dropped his hands and snapped—

“If you tell me that you’re fine, I will instruct JARVIS to give you only cold showers for a month when we return to the Tower!”

Lips quirking with fondness, Tony obligingly stayed quiet, thinking.

He knew that Loki was right. With it thrown in his face like that, he could see that the way he was acting was only creating stress. And probably not just for himself— Barnes was observant, and had most likely noticed that Tony was anxious in his presence. It was only a matter of time before Barnes began avoiding him again, like he had in the beginning.

Something needed to change— and not for everyone else’s sake. It was like Rhodey and Pepper always used to say, when he saw them more often. Like what Steve still often said. Like Loki was telling him now.

He needed to do this for himself.

Tony had tried avoidance, and he’d tried simply forcing himself to accept things like Pietro had suggested.

Maybe…

Maybe it was time to try something else.

“I need to speak to him,” Tony decided.

He expected Loki to argue, to try and say that it was too soon, maybe, that this was just another brand of trying force himself into acceptance. But instead, Loki smiled tightly – reluctant, yet glad – and wished him luck. Maybe Tony’s constant badgering to try and get Loki to open up more to Thor had made an impact after all.

Huh. It seemed like he and Loki had started learning actual healthy habits from each other. Who would have guessed?

—•—

Making the conscious effort to go and speak to Barnes was different from worrying about a random encounter. Maybe it was the aspect of control, or maybe it was the fact that Tony finally felt like he had a chance at making a change. Whatever it was, when he found Barnes and asked for a moment alone, he felt none of the paralysing panic that he had before, and even as they moved to an isolated area between a few tents, he found that he could still breathe with relative ease. He wasn’t entirely calm, but it was manageable.

“You don’t have to beat around the bush,” Barnes said immediately, not even waiting for a greeting. “I know what this is.”

As much as he appreciated the directness, Tony wasn’t sure that Barnes did know. The guy looked like he was preparing himself for a fight– muscles tense, jaw clenched, leaning slightly forward and angled so that his metal arm was closer to Tony than the one made of flesh and bone.
“I just want to talk,” Tony assured him, though it did nothing to help Barnes relax. He was still tense as he stood waiting for Tony to continue, but Tony felt like his tongue was suddenly laden and heavy and he couldn’t quite find anything to say.

After a few minutes of glancing eyes and fidgeting fingers, Barnes tilted up his chin with a determined scowl.

“If I haven’t already apologised enough for what happened, I would like to do so again,” he said. His scowl slipped into something a little more vulnerable as he continued, seeming to find more of a rhythm the more he spoke. “I don’t have many memories from before, and I didn’t know your father well anyway. But Steve told me that he was a good man—“

Tony couldn’t help the noise that escaped from the back of his throat– not quite a snort, not quite a groan.

Barnes’ confidence stumbled, and he didn’t continue what he was saying.

“Don’t worry,” Tony muttered. “I didn’t mean– he did try, but he wasn’t always good. That’s all.” They came out broken and stuttered, but the words allowed him to find his courage again, and as he caught Barnes’ eye once more, he knew exactly what he needed to say to this man. “My mother, though,” he said, his voice finally regaining its strength. “She was a good person. She didn’t deserve to die.”

“No,” Barnes agreed. “She wasn’t the target.”

“I know,” Tony said. “Steve told me.” He paused, noting again that this seemed just as hard for Barnes as it was for him. Perhaps, before starting on such a dark topic, he should have been more worried about reawakening the Winter Soldier. But Barnes didn’t look like he was ready for a fight, anymore. He was still tense, but it was more of a shamed tension than the way he had been poised before. Still, Tony hesitated with the words on the tip of his tongue, not sure if he wanted to say them. But he had sought Barnes for a reason, and he didn’t want to leave having only done half a job. So he steeled himself, and said, “Steve also told me that it wasn’t your fault.”

Barnes didn’t look surprised– it was unlikely, after all, that he hadn’t spoken to Steve himself. But he didn’t look relieved, either.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me,” Barnes started, but Tony cut him off with a shake of his head.

“I can’t forgive you,” Tony told him, powering forward with an explanation even as Barnes’ expression closed off. “I can’t, because if I do then that means that there was something to forgive in the first place, and... I do believe Steve when he says it wasn’t your fault. But I can’t forgive HYDRA for what they did either– what they did to my parents, as well as what they did to you.”

“I understand,” Barnes said, letting out a heavy breath. “I wouldn’t have wanted you to forgive me anyway. Not because of what you just said. But because I don’t want to just forget what I did. It happened, and I have to live with it.”

Well, that was a sentiment that Tony could certainly understand. There had been a few times in the past when Pepper or Rhodey or Steve or Bruce had found him in a nest of empty bottles and self-hatred and had pleaded for him to forgive himself. But how could he? How could he forgive the deaths caused by his own designs, when forgiveness felt like a cheap escape from atonement?

The answer wasn’t easy, but he hadn’t wallowed so much recently, because he had learned a way of living with it all that resonated more deeply with his own brand of morality.
He couldn’t forgive himself for what he had done, but he could fight to make it right, and to learn to like the person he became in the process.

“Steve always says that forgiveness isn’t for the other person, it’s for yourself,” Tony muttered, half echoing his earlier thoughts. “I’ve never been able to believe that, not really. It always felt like a cop out.”

“Well, Steve’s always been too nice for his own good,” Barnes said, and Tony caught himself smiling in response. He didn’t stop the smile when he noticed it though, because Barnes seemed to relax a little at the sight as well. They both needed the solid ground to stand on – and for both of them, Steve had been that more than once.

“If only he could be a little nicer when waking people up in the mornings,” Tony drawled – the humour not tossed out quite so carefree as he usually made it seem, but Barnes nodded nonetheless.

“Steve thinks that being able to forgive someone can bring you peace, but I’ve always found it easier to sleep at night after venting my frustrations,” Barnes agreed. “And if the, ah, venting makes the person less likely to do it again, then all the better, right?”

Such a notion coming from that person should have set Tony on edge, but he was pleased to find it had the opposite effect.

“I would say that I’m surprised by you, but Steve is usually a fairly decent judge of character,” Tony admitted. “At least when he’s not being affected by a stupid alien stick of spite.”

“Nah,” said Barnes, shaking off the confusion of the last half of that statement. “He’s a terrible judge of character. He always sees the best in people.”

“Maybe that’s not always a bad thing.” Tony offered his hand. “You know what? You’re not so bad, Barnes.”

“You’re not half bad, either, Stark,” Barnes replied, accepting the gesture and giving Tony’s hand a firm shake.

They weren’t friends, and Tony knew it would be a while before they ever could be. But a simple conversation, no matter how stilted, can change a lot of things, even if in only a simple way. The face that he had previously only been able to equate with his mother’s murderer now had its own personality, and his subconscious had something else to latch onto when next Barnes entered his field of vision.

He’d meant what he said.

While he couldn’t forget and he couldn’t forgive, Tony thought that maybe he would be able to divorce the persona of the Winter Soldier from this war-weary man – and that, at least, was a start.

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As Tony headed back to Loki to give him the update, he found that he felt lighter than he had before. It had felt good to make progress with Barnes, and he wanted to share the feeling. To be honest, he’d expected that Loki would be gone – they were all busy, after all. If Loki wasn’t there, he’d simply head back out to Shuri and Rocket, but if he was, then he could put the god’s mind at ease first.

When he found Loki only a few yards from where he had left him, Tony grinned. But the smile fell when he saw who Loki was speaking with, and his expression shifted into a worried frown when he heard the nature of the conversation.
“In order to gain possession of the Soul Stone, Thanos was forced to sacrifice something that he loved,” Loki was saying, his eyes on Quill though his shoulders were angled toward Nebula, as if he had been talking to her a moment before. Loki barely glanced at Tony as he slid in amongst them, but a light touch of fingers at his wrist let Tony know that Loki was glad he was there.

“A monster like that could never love,” Quill scoffed.

“He could believe himself capable,” Loki countered. “He might even have felt it. A twisted, awful kind of love perhaps, but enough that he was capable of feeling its loss.”

“What are you saying?” Quill asked, his expression scrunching like he knew exactly what Loki was about to say, but didn’t want to believe it.

Tony was beginning to regret his decision to join them.

“Gamora was always his favourite,” Nebula whispered. Her gaze snapped to Loki, her tinny voice deader than Tony had ever heard it. “She’s gone, then?”

Loki nodded.

During the short time that Tony had known her, Nebula had always been stoic and incredibly strong, able to fight past even the trauma of torture. But that was physical pain, and this was something else entirely. Her dark eyes seemed to shatter as her whole body curled in on itself, her arms wrapping around her middle. She did a good job of holding herself upright, and Tony knew that was probably only because she had been expecting Loki’s answer, had known it even without being told. Yet nothing can truly prepare you for such news and nothing can smother that blow. She was silent, but her pain screamed louder than the surrounding cacophony of soldiers as she turned her broken gaze to the sky.

Quill was nowhere near as restrained.

“She’s not,” he snapped, his face twisted in denial. “You can’t possibly know—“

“I told you that I saw inside his mind while we were aboard his ship,” Loki said tensely. “I am sorry that I didn’t tell you earlier, but it slipped my mind.”

“It slipped your—“

“I didn’t know Gamora well. I was with Thanos for only a relatively brief period, and during that time she spent much of it away from him. I saw what he had done in his mind when I was implanting the idea for him to come here as he was dwelling on it horribly, but it was a brief glimpse and, in my estimation, of little importance compared to the task at hand.” Quill looked about to explode again, and Nebula’s jaw was working with violent intent. But Loki pushed on. “Had Nebula not thought to ask, maybe I wouldn’t have thought on it again. We knew Thanos had the Soul Stone, and that was what mattered.”

Tony could tell that Loki was only taking a pause, that there was no doubt something about to be added along the lines of differing priorities, likely not an apology but at least an explanation for why he hadn’t told Quill and Nebula the truth before. But Quill didn’t know Loki like Tony did, and he was blinded by grief. He didn’t wait for the rest.

“I knew you didn’t care about her,” Quill spat. “She was right. You are a monster.”

Loki’s expression twisted, but Tony intercepted him before he could do something regrettable.
“Come on,” said Tony, gripping Loki’s arm and pulling him away. “You helped me, earlier, but nothing you say is going to make that feel better.”

Quill called them bastards as they left, but Nebula hardly seemed to notice that they were going, staring blankly up to the blue expanse above. Tony felt horrible, leaving them that way, but he knew that this presence would not be welcome.

They needed time to grieve, time to come to terms with what had happened, and they needed to do so while surrounded by the people who knew Gamora best.

In fact, Tony thought, they probably all needed time with the people they cared about.

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The time was growing closer, and they could all feel it. Loki’s estimated three weeks had passed, and Thanos was going to appear at any moment. Consequently the atmosphere around the camp was electric, yet simultaneously sombre, like they were caught in a purgatory of frozen time. It was a feeling that Tony had never experienced before. He knew he wasn’t alone in that– while Thor and Loki had fought for Asgard, and Steve, Rhodey, and Sam had all done their time in the military, none of the others had ever been forced to wait this long before a battle of this vein.

The fight with the Chitauri had happened so fast, they hadn’t had time to think before they were already in the thick of things. Every fight leading up to this moment had been thrust upon them and they had been forced to keep pace in order to survive. But this… this waiting was torturous in a way that the fighting and the violence could never be.

Tony had read enough books, spoken with enough vets to know the truth. They all say that the worst part of war is the waiting, but nothing can prepare you for the suffocating march of time, the agonisingly slow yet inescapable countdown that would end only when the world came crashing down on their heads.

This would be the largest pitched battle in the history of the entire planet. Not a single one of them, not even the Asgardians knew what they could expect, and the weight of it settled over the entire encampment, a feeling they all shared but none could give a name to.

It was somewhere halfway between acceptance and fear– between helplessness and determination– between anticipation and dread. An indescribable fog that they were all burdened with, no matter who they were or where they had come from.

They were all dealing with it in their own ways, Tony supposed, yet the night that the satellites detected multiple masses moving toward Earth, the team found themselves sitting around one of the many campfires in the encampment. The Guardians and the Wakandans were around fires of their own, taking comfort from their own people, but rather than join the Einherjar across the way Thor had joined the Avengers’ circle, sitting on Loki’s other side. Sif joined them for a while before retreating with Fandral, but Thor stayed.

Sif was not the only one to come and go. Some of the soldiers came by for a word, some pressed their hands against an Avengers shoulder, though whether in thanks, in comfort, or for luck Tony couldn’t tell. He was sure, though, that it was all done in solidarity, in a desperate bid for connection that they may never feel again.

They were all fairly close to each other, pressing in toward the warmth despite the dry desert air. Loki was cool enough at Tony’s side that he remained comfortable, and he was grateful for it, as he didn’t want to spend what was possibly one of his last nights on Earth sweating like a pig.
It was both melancholy and uplifting, that Tony could spend this night amongst the people he considered his closest friends. Yet despite their closeness, it felt like there was a gap in the circle where Peter should have been, a hole that no one else could quite fill.

He and Shuri had been sent back to New York. JARVIS had informed Tony that they had arrived safely, and that Shuri had used bastardised technology from her Wakandan plane to entirely disfigure one of Tony’s computers into something extraordinary. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the two kids being able to watch what was happening, knowing what horrors they may witness—but he did know he felt reassured to have the pair capable of commandeering technology from afar, able to help without being put in danger.

Shuri’s remote control of her force-fields, he knew, would be invaluable.

Still, despite the missing faces, the circle was a reassuring place to be. Some were quiet, preferring to simply bask in the presence of their friends, while some talked and laughed and seemed to be truly enjoying themselves as much as they were getting their mind off the coming days.

Normally, Tony would have been a talker, rattling off about anything and enjoying every minute of it. He would have been encouraging them all to joke and enjoy themselves, to have a competition throwing Cap’s shield maybe or challenging them all to one of those insult contests he’d heard Loki and Thor talk about. He would have been trying anything and everything to distract not only himself but everyone else from realising how he felt.

But not on that night, because Tony was terrified, and he knew that everyone could tell.

It wasn’t just that he was afraid of Thanos, or afraid that he might die. He was afraid of that, sure, he’d be an idiot if he wasn’t, and the fear of failure was something that had followed him around since he had first put on the Iron Man armour. It had haunted him through nightmares of that missile exploding in Manhattan, of the space on the other side of the portal, of his team cold and still on some rock in the middle of nowhere while he was left alone in the dark.

Loki’s own admission of fear a few weeks before had only heightened Tony’s own understanding of what he had on the line.

It had been years since Wanda Maximoff had permanently carved the image of a dying Loki into Tony’s mind, but it was just as clear as it had been that day in Sokovia. Clearer, perhaps, or at least more real, because he had seen Thanos in person now, and with Loki’s plan accepted as a legitimate backup by every fucking person in the encampment it was more than just a possibility.

He could feel Loki’s arms around him, his cool presence pressed tightly against his side. But even as Tony turned his face into Loki’s shirt and felt Loki’s breathing, he couldn’t force the thought away.

“Tony.” Tony glanced up to see Rhodey’s concerned expression shimmering before him in the flickering light from the fire. “Are you all right?”

Tony didn’t have it in him to lie.

“Stupid question, Rhodes,” he said instead, offering him a small smile. It was wobbly, but it was the best he had. “Are any of us?”

“Well, no,” Rhodey admitted. “But I’ve seen you worried, and nervous. I’ve even seen you scared.” He didn’t say that in those situations he normally couldn’t get Tony to shut up, but it wasn’t needed.

“Earth has never seen an army like this before, honey bear,” Tony said. It sounded weak even to his own ears. “Thanos won’t know what hit him.”
“No,” Rhodey said again. “He won’t.”

There wasn’t really a reply to that, and Rhodey didn’t say anything else. But when Tony went to fit himself back into Loki’s side, he found the god watching him with a frown, his green eyes so soft that Tony felt his mask slip away.

When Loki seemed to repress a flinch, Tony wondered what he must look like.

“Come on,” Loki sighed, adjusting his grip so that Tony sat more upright. Tony nearly whined as Loki untangled their arms and stood, but his intentions became clear a moment later as his fingers began to glow with a familiar shade of green. They wished the team goodnight, and then Tony sighed with relief as Loki whisked them away to somewhere with a little more privacy.

Tony had equipped the team with pop-up tents that were more advanced than anything any of the armies had brought, save perhaps for the Dora Milaje. They were made of a high-tech fabric that regulated temperature, and were customised to fit each inhabitant's preferences. JARVIS was woven through them and could keep them all updated by turning the very walls of the tent into interactive screens, and, as an added bonus, movies could be projected onto the ceiling. They were as close as Tony thought he could currently get to the awesomeness of the tents in Harry Potter, and they were as comfortable as any tent could possibly be. He and Loki had shared one while staying in the desert, and while it wasn’t ideal, it was theirs.

Yet when Tony opened his eyes, he found that Loki had brought him not to their tent, but to the quinjet. Despite the engine being turned off the craft still hummed with the soothing sound of electronics, and the metal interior was familiar in a way that the fabric tents weren’t, no matter their advanced technology. As they curled together on one of the chairs it was hard and hot and physically uncomfortable, but it soothed Tony’s nerves in a way that he knew the tent wouldn’t have.

Loki didn’t say anything, and Tony found that he didn’t need him to. All he needed in that moment was for Loki to hold him close, to hear Loki’s steady heartbeat and feel Loki’s cool skin pressed against his own.

They were silent for quite some time, and Tony thought that Loki needed this just as much as he did. It was a similar sort of comfort to what he had felt surrounded by the others outside, but not quite the same. It was less cloying, less suffocating—yet the longer Tony stayed there, the more painful it became until he found he couldn’t hold the silence any longer.

“I can’t lose you,” Tony whispered, his fingers pressing hard against the thin fabric of Loki’s shirt where they rested at his shoulder blades. He wanted to close his eyes, but he wanted to see his lover at the same time— the latter won out, and he tilted up his chin to try and meet Loki’s gaze.

Unlike the last time Tony had whispered that desperate confession, Loki didn’t offer words of comfort. He probably understood that they weren’t of any use, that no empty platitude could make that enveloping anxiety disappear.

“There is a difference between lies to bolster false hope and enjoying a last moment of quiet before the storm,” Loki replied, his lips soft and cool where they brushed against Tony’s cheek. “For now, Anthony, let it just be the two of us.”
Tony tried to honour Loki’s wish, and usually it wasn’t hard. It was always so easy to lose himself in the sensation of Loki’s nails digging sharp against his back, of Loki’s lips caressing and bruising and whispering promises of forever all at the same time. When you feel like every touch might be the last it’s usually a simple thing to give in to the passion and live in the moment, but the shadow of what might still loomed over them, staining their every kiss with an inescapable darkness.

Loving Loki was the most simple thing in the world, but the likelihood of losing that was an impossible thing to dismiss, even for the sake of a perfect moment. Because yeah, if it weren’t for the impending prospect of an ending, the moment truly would have been perfect.

Determined that it wouldn’t be his last chance, Tony let Loki know that he loved him in every way he could, and did his best to simply bask in the passion that he knew he would treasure for the rest of his life, no matter how long that would be. Yet he couldn’t let go of one desperate plea– a thought that, though he couldn't say to whom it was directed, was something dangerously close to a prayer.

*Please,* his mind whispered. *Please let us have years of this.*
Tony didn’t hesitate. He’d made his choice long ago.

Sometimes, Tony wonders what it feels like to die.

Every time he had faced death before it had been fast paced, in the middle of a fight or a kidnapping or some other unexpected event. Even when suffering from palladium poisoning, there had been a thousand other things on his mind, from ensuring the future of his company, his friends, the innocents that he would no longer be around to protect– not to mention that whole palaver with Hammer and Vanko. Every brush with death had been accompanied by a rapid and desperate fight for survival with no room for pause. No, he’d never experienced a slow fall, an injury or an illness that gently pulled him under with nothing to do but to greet the inevitable with open arms.

If he were forced to, though, Tony would probably guess that it felt something like this. Suspended in time, caught in a peace that would only last until it ended, waiting for the moment that the world would be uprooted and everything would be changed forever.

The updates from the analysts rang in his ears, JARVIS having been granted the honour of distributing messages and news to the massive contingent of troops – human and otherwise – waiting inside the shields constructed by Shuri. Yet all the updates remained the same.

All quiet.

No movement.

Stay alert.

Food and water had been distributed, and the soldiers had long since been granted permission to stand easy and rest on the ground while they waited. Thor had left his post and spoken to Loki in soft undertones about something, and although he wasn’t privy to Thor’s idea, given the way that Loki had immediately and violently rejected it Tony could guess. But not half an hour later Loki was coaching Strange’s wizards into using some kind of cooling spell, and soon it felt like their bubble of force-field had an inbuilt air-conditioner.

Steve worried that the wizards might tire themselves out but as Fury said– it was summer, and the desert was hot. Soldiers had fought in worse before and they were certainly well supplied, but without the magical help, they still ran the risk of losing their army to natural causes before the fight had even begun.

If it ever did, that is.

There were a few jitters in the ranks, people wondering whether they had been right to answer the Avengers’ call for help. Although thankfully it didn’t seem that there was a lack of belief in the threat– merely a concern that Thanos might not take the bait.

But Tony remained confident, and he knew that his teammates, especially those who had fought Thanos before, did as well.
After all, even without his faith in Loki’s skills with mental manipulation there was no reason for Thanos to attack anywhere else. They had what he wanted– the two remaining Infinity Stones, with one encased in Loki’s sceptre and the other pulsing gently in time with Tony’s heart, as if it could feel its brethren close by.

Actually—

Tony glanced over to see Steve on the alert, his shield in his hands as he stared out at the westernmost edge of the force-field where he, Barnes, Tony, and Loki had been stationed. Most of the Avengers were spread throughout the army, with a few heavy hitters, like Thor and Hulk, in the epicentre of the dome. Yet they had hypothesised that Thanos would be most likely to attack on the west, since that was where both of their Infinity Stones were located. Maybe they were hedging their bets, but if they were going to have a chance, they needed to be able to exercise as much control over the progression of the fight as was possible.

For most of the wait, Steve had remained calm and stoic, moving through the ranks in their section and helping to keep up morale. But now he was staring at a point beyond the force-field as he pulled his cowl firmly down over his head.

“Everyone get ready,” said Steve, his voice calm despite the way Tony could see his body tense. “He’s close.”

Tony was about to ask how Steve knew when, in the middle of his field of vision, a red dot appeared, like a laser pointer aimed at something on the other side of the force-field. As he watched, the pinprick of light stretched into a ring, and continued to flow outward. Everything the ring of light passed over painted a picture, like a reversed video of an eraser being wiped across a blackboard– and where before there had been nothing but an empty stretch of desert, there was suddenly an army that stretched for miles, with Thanos in the centre of it all, holding his red-glowing Gauntlet high.

*The Reality Stone*, Tony thought, but that was all the time he had left. A moment later, the first wave of the assault was slamming up against Shuri’s shield, battering at it with their bodies. The groups of Chitauri hung back but the Outriders had no such compunctions, throwing themselves at the barrier of energy and tearing themselves to shreds in their desperate and mindless attempts to reach the prey on the other side.

For a moment, it seemed like they had something of a stalemate. The Outriders were piling against the shield, killing themselves, yet there were so many of them that they would be able to keep going until something gave way. Even if they thought that they could wait this out– Loki was right when he had spoken to Sharpe, this went further than just a defensive. It was probably their last real chance to wipe Thanos from the map, and for that they needed to get at Thanos as much as he wanted to get at them.

And Thanos, it seemed, was not inclined to wait long.

He took two long strides forward, and the mass of Outriders parted for him even as they continued their assault on the shield. It should have been impossible from the distance, but when Thanos looked up, Tony couldn’t help but feel like the Mad Titan was staring right at him.

Tony flinched.

Then Thanos raised his open hand, swathed in a golden glove that glittered with four brightly coloured gems.

“Brace yourselves!” Steve yelled, his voice amplified across thousands of ears courtesy of JARVIS–
though for those who had Thanos in their line of sight, the warning was unnecessary.

The moment Thanos closed his fist, a blast of purple exploded from the Power Stone and slammed into the shield. Shuri’s hard work exploded on impact, driving the Outriders back with a massive electrical shockwave, the sound of it vibrating Tony’s ear-drums– not unlike when Thor had struck Steve’s shield with Mjölnir the first time they met, yet a hundred times louder.

If it weren’t for his armour, Tony was sure that he would be on the ground. His head was aching as it were, and as he looked around he saw that the force of the explosion had knocked down most of the troops around him. Of the army, the Einherjar alone remained standing, with the human soldiers clutching at their ears and curled on the ground. Yet even as they struggled to regain their bearings, Tony could see that they all understood what had happened.

The barrier had fallen, and the Outriders were free to charge.

They came in an unbroken wave, surging over the desert in a solid wall of teeth and flesh. JARVIS was saying something, or maybe it was one of the Einherjar struggling to organise his troops to fill the gaps in the lines, but Tony couldn’t make out the words. He could feel his heart beating, louder than anything else beside the pounding of feet.

Eyes wide with fear and determined anticipation, Tony glanced across to Loki, meeting his gaze as best he could from behind his faceplate. No words passed between them– they weren’t needed. They’d already said everything they had to say.

The sound of heavy steps against the sand was building into a deafening roar, the Outriders charging on all four – or, in some cases, six – legs. Tony turned his gaze forward, and took his first step, beginning the charge toward the oncoming army. Loki vanished from beside him with a flicker of green in the same moment that Tony’s feet left the ground, but from the corner of his eye he could see Barnes and Steve running forward, matching the pace of the Einherjar on their flanks.

With the human troops incapacitated they’d lost their chance to mow down the front line with bullets, and save for the few sporting burns from the force-field, the Outriders were unhindered– and when the two sides collided it was with a cacophony of screams and the clanging of swords against teeth.

Tony rose slightly in the air as he reached the front lines, firing first with his repulsors to clear a path before diving straight into the mess of flesh and claws. He fired and twisted and fired again, and the flashing warnings on his HUD were so frequent that they were giving him a headache after mere minutes of fighting. Loki flickered into existence at Tony’s left side and decapitated an Outrider in a single smooth stroke before vanishing again, and Tony was once more left in a sea of mindless violence.

It became apparent very quickly that this would be nothing like the fight in Central Park. The Outriders were different, more durable somehow, like Thanos had experimented with his recipe. Actually, Tony wouldn’t put it past him. With four Infinity Stones, Thanos had probably been able to create this army in a matter of moments.

“Requesting back up in the south-west sector, we’re being overrun back here!”

Tony lost sight of Steve almost immediately, buried by the sheer number of Outriders. He could still see Einherjar behind him though, and he tried to keep contact with them, thinning out the ranks in front of them as they tried to hold the Outriders back long enough to give the human troops enough time to recover.

“They’re coming from all sides now, we’re surrounded—”
“Good, draw them in!”

Tony spun in the air, trying to ignore the messages that JARVIS was filtering through the comms. An Outrider caught him by the leg as he tried to cover one of the Asgardian’s backs, and he was flung away from them and further into the fray. He regained his feet quickly and downed one alien bastard with a heavy punch.

“There’s a group of Outriders running south, someone needs to head them off—“

“My pleasure, humans.”

Tony shook his head and tried to focus, but the sheer volume of chatter was—

“Requesting backup—“

“—Widow has routed a few of the—“

“我们不堪重负—“

“Iron Man, you’re needed by—“

“Has anyone seen Strange?“

“–потеряли связь с генералом Волковым—“

“Requesting backup—“

“Thanos is on the east—“

“En route now, soldier—“

“Negative, I have visual on Thanos, north of—“

“Mute!” Tony snarled, his head ringing far worse than it had been after the initial attack on the force-field.

The words from too many sources, filtered already by JARVIS yet all deemed important, accompanied by flashing translations of the updates in other languages were all serving to distract him from the creatures attempting to tear him to shreds. He understood that his flight capability and his armour made him one of the more able to help out others, but how could he when the noise stopped him from helping himself?

“Sir, you must remain in contact—“

“There’s too much, JARVIS,” Tony snapped, then he cursed as a claw tore through the armour on his left thigh and pushed the metal deep into his flesh. “Cut them off!”

“But if they have need of you—“

“You’ll let me know,” Tony replied. He took the time to duck another swipe and shove his arm down an Outrider’s throat, leaving a grenade inside and suffering only a few aesthetic scrapes in the process. “Please, J,” he said, pulling away from the Outrider enough to avoid being injured, but not enough to avoid the splatter of grey-blue blood and gore. “I need you to silence the chatter.” He could feel the guilt bubbling up, but it was quickly knocked away as another creature almost
managed to lock its jaws around his shoulder. He couldn’t do the others any good if he was distracted from keeping himself alive.

“All right, Sir,” said JARVIS. “I will keep you updated.”

He had hoped that by cutting off the comms Tony would have the chance to actually think, but the lack of voices didn’t slow the press of bodies.

Finding himself completely surrounded, Tony activated his laser and spun, cutting through the ranks of Outriders and creating enough space to take a short breather. In the span of that breath, he glanced around and saw the mess of battle. Even through his helmet he could smell the fight, the rancid stink of the Outriders’ flesh that was somehow preferable to the scent of human suffering. In the silence granted by the lack of comms he could hear the pained screams, accompanied by roars of the Hulk and the explosions of weapons.

For a moment, Tony felt like he was entirely, utterly alone.

Oh, he could see a group of soldiers to his left, though where they were from he didn’t know— their various uniforms were blurred under dust and blood into the same dark mess. A SHIELD agent fell not two yards to his right– an Einherjar danced in and out of his vision, swinging a sword that dripped with blue blood– and he heard the tell tale whirr of repulsors over his head– but he couldn’t focus on any of it. He couldn’t help them, and they couldn’t help him. They were all stuck in an individual fight to survive, unable to focus on anything other than the next monster that stepped into their path.

They’d spread themselves too thin, there were just too many—

A heavy body slammed into Tony’s side, and he only just managed to keep his feet. The distraction was enough for another Outrider to dig its claws under a panel on Tony’s shoulder blade and tear it free, and even as the nanobots repaired the damage another Outrider came at Tony from the other side.

He’d stayed on the ground for a moment too long.

Tony managed to shoot a few from in front but he only had so many hands, and while JARVIS was doing an admirable job of using the weapons on his back to keep them from coming at him from behind there were simply too many. There was a mechanical whirr above and he raised a hand, managing to knock the Chitauri from its vehicle but yet another Outrider slammed into him, and Tony was knocked off his feet.

The Outriders didn’t give him the chance to regain his footing– they simply scrambled over him, their claws scratching and teeth snapping, and every time he pushed one away another joined the fray. The nanotech fought to keep up but there was only so much that it could do, and the Outriders were tearing at him as fast as the nanobots could fix the damage. He managed to kill one and its body fell atop him, pinning his arm against his chest—

The sun was too hot and the Outriders were too heavy. Tony felt like he was being crushed, and despite the filtration in his suit the air was cloying and he couldn’t breathe—

“Sir, hold on!” JARVIS said, his voice frantic. “I am finding help—”

“No—”

“Anthony—”
“No Loki,” Tony gasped. “You— focus. I can do this.”

“But—”

When Tony interrupted again, his voice was steadier. “I can do this.”

The Space Stone pulsed, and in a flash of blue pushed everything away from his chest. It didn’t last long, but long enough for him to bend a knee, get some leverage, pull an arm free and shoot one of the fucking things in the face.

He fought his way out, blasting and kicking and tearing at the writhing mass of bodies on top of him until he could see the clear sky. His repulsors pulled him free and he finally twisted into the air, kicking away the last of the Outriders and flying straight up into blissful, empty space.

His armour was heavily damaged, and while the nanobots that remained were still operational, he knew that any further damage risked compromising the armour entirely. He knew that JARVIS had flown spares in and was waiting in the wings, but the nanotech had to be applied manually— and he knew, just from the past few minutes, that he was not going to have the time.

Breathing heavily, Tony took the moment to look down.

It was hard to see what was happening as a whole— their carefully planned units had long since disintegrated, with Outriders and Chitauri shattering their ranks and merging everything together. Einherjar were fighting alongside SHIELD agents, Dora Milaje were covering American artillery. Tony could spot a few of his teammates— Hulk was smashing on the southern perimeter, Thor was lighting up the skies near to the middle. He could see Groot as well, several Outriders impaled on an arm – a branch? – and swinging them around like they were weapons as well.

And Loki was, well. He was everywhere.

Tony didn’t know how he was doing it— maintaining that many illusions must have been exhausting. But then, Loki had demonstrated his ability to do so during their first game of capture the flag, and Tony knew that the god was far more powerful than he usually let on. Tony saw one of the Lokis look up at him, his expression etched with obvious relief, before turning his attention back to his own fight.

Loki was following a suggestion made during one of the planning meetings, trying to draw Thanos out, to confuse him. After all, they knew Loki would be one of the main targets. Thanos knew what he had.

Still, Loki had yet to use his Infinity Stone, and while Tony knew that was only a matter of time, he was reluctant to use his own. There was nowhere he wanted to be more than right on that battlefield, fighting for everything he cared about— and the Space Stone knew it. It buzzed at his chest, alive and hot and burning to be used. But Tony knew that he couldn’t. He knew that Thanos could probably sense the Stone, like Steve could, maybe, but he didn’t want to give unnecessary proof. Until it was his last hope, Tony would keep his Stone a secret.

He was forced back into the fight when one of the Chitauri’s vehicles, yet to be shot down by a quinjet, targeted him mid flight. The Chitauri’s inability to bank worth a damn wasn’t something he could take advantage of without convenient buildings for them to crash into, but his suit was far more advanced than the last time he had fought the bastards in the air. He was faster, more agile, and far more experienced.

This time, he also had more friends.
He, Rhodey, and Sam watched each other’s back and picked off tails, all the while helping out their teammates on the ground and keeping the quinjets free from any Outriders that decided to jump—although, learning from last time, the quinjets were flying high.

So long as Tony stayed away from the ground, he could avoid getting swamped and help his team like they had planned.

Unfortunately, things were never going to be so smooth.

From his vantage point in the air Tony could see another pile up happening. His repulsors burned hot as he approached at speed, the Outriders screaming as their skin bubbled and blistered. A Chitauri tried to intercept him but JARVIS shot it down easily and Tony was able to focus his attention on the pile of grey monsters. Tony saw a foot sticking out from under a dead Outrider and grabbed it, charging his boot repulsors and shooting back up to safety. Only when he was high enough did he look down, half worried that he would find himself holding a corpse.

But rather than a dead friend, Tony saw the ex-Winter Soldier quite happily hanging upside down, his gun aimed at the creatures below as he took the opportunity to shoot from above.

Letting out a relieved laugh, Tony carried Barnes to a relatively quiet spot, where he could see Drax happily slamming Outriders into the ground.

“I’m going to drop you off here, Barnes,” Tony yelled, hoping JARVIS would relay the message because they didn’t have a hope in hell of Barnes hearing otherwise. Thankfully, Barnes did stop shooting long enough for Tony to twist in the air so the man was the right way up and could land on his feet. He gave Tony a salute before getting right back to it, joining Drax in his assault.

Tony flew straight up and then darted left. He flipped in the air and tackled an Outrider from where it had been clawing at Hulk’s back, and then shot a few more away from a squadron of British troops who were doing an admirable job of holding a pack of Outriders away from the spot where the precious generator was buried.

The troops thanked him by shooting down a Chitauri he hadn’t noticed, and then he headed over to where he saw Steve and Okoye facing down far too many by themselves. He and Steve did their reflective trick, the vibranium of Steve’s shield resonating with the repulsor and shooting out a smooth beam that was twice as strong—

Then he launched into the air once again only to be knocked back down to the ground when he collided with an Outrider that had jumped up to grab a passing wizard at the same time. Tony immediately hurried to get back in the sky, not wanting to ever chance being crushed again. As he turned over, though, he saw a Chitauri standing over him, its gun to his head—

And then a sword point slid neatly through its neck, and the Chitauri fell to the ground.

Sif stared down at Tony for a moment, her lips pressed tightly together, before she spun her sword in her hand and held it toward him, hilt first.

“Thanks,” Tony grunted.

She smirked as she pulled him back upright. “You’re welcome.”

As he blasted past T’Challa and Nebula working in tandem to cut down a whole pack of Outriders Tony saw something truly inspiring. While most of the wizards were working to help the injured, Wong seemed to have perfected the art of cutting Outriders in half, creating portals in front of a charging creature and then snapping them closed just before they got all the way through.
Tony knew the guy was awesome.

Of course, it would have been more useful if Wong managed to close a portal around Thanos’ wrist, but—

But none of it seemed to matter, because they were so very outnumbered. They had faced these odds before and won, but the first time the Chitauri had been bottlenecked by the portal and the last time they had been able to funnel the wave of Outriders thanks to the shape of Central Park— but this time, they were far from being so lucky. The desert, while the perfect place to keep the battle away from civilisation, was too flat to create a bottleneck.

There was a hill to the east that offered a natural barrier, but even that did little to stymie the Outriders. Still, the flat ground made it easier on the fliers to pick off the runners while still allowing the battle to sprawl, and that was rather important.

During all this time Thanos, unfortunately, was nearly impossible to pin down. He seemed to have learned from the last time and was using the Stones that he had to stay one step ahead of anyone who tried to engage him. It was easy to see where he had been— there were troops stuck solid in the ground, unable to free themselves and left to the mercy of the Outriders. There were whole areas scorched by the Power Stone, bodies destroyed so thoroughly that there was nothing left.

Tony wondered why.

They had all spoken at length on the way that Thanos thought, on how he far preferred to have others do his dirty work. But when Thanos deemed it necessary to enter the picture, he usually properly entered it.

It didn’t matter, though. His motives were irrelevant. Thanos was arrogant, they all knew that. They just had to draw him out.

That, unfortunately, was easier said than done.

But not impossible.

In the end, they couldn’t have done it without Pietro. Since Thanos was now too used to the orange portals to be caught that way, Quicksilver was the only one fast enough to catch Thanos unawares. So when Thanos appeared within range, Pietro ran toward him as fast as he could.

Unfortunately, Thanos realised that something was off. Tony saw Pietro get nearly all the way before the Gauntlet glowed green and he was frozen in time, his expression focused on his running, entirely unaware of the fact that he was caught in a different time stream to the rest of the battle.

Tony was nearer to the scene than anyone else, and was able to get close enough to blast Thanos. It wasn’t enough to harm him, but it did break his concentration, and Pietro continued his run unhindered, still ignorant of his close call.

Thanos looked up to Tony, his expression pleased—

And then—

Hope seemed to come from nowhere, but Tony knew that she had been holding on to Thanos’ clothes, deposited by their resident Speedster. She used a blaster to the face to attempt to stun him before using her remaining velocity to spin and get a firm grip on the Infinity Gauntlet. She tried to pull it from his hand, her wings straining—
But Thanos merely swatted her aside like she were still the size of an insect, and Hope slammed into the ground with a horrifying crack.

“No!” Scott exploded from somewhere at Thanos’ right shoulder, but he didn’t just grow to normal size– he kept going up and up, until he towered over the Titan by several feet.

“Scott, don’t—” Tony tried, but it was too late. Ant-Man drew back his fist and slammed it into Thanos’ jaw.

And Thanos didn’t even flinch.

Instead, he considered the giant in front of him like an object in a museum, before drawing back his own hand and punching Scott hard enough to leave him unconscious on the ground.

They didn’t have time to worry, though– because Hope and Scott had given them the opening they needed. Strange – or, more likely, one of his wizard friends since Strange was meant to be sticking with Mantis – took the opportunity to open a portal and deliver the Hulk. But of course, they wouldn’t just let Hulk face the Titan alone, and backup hurried in from a few more portals. Sif and Fandral cut down the Outriders who tried to help Thanos, while Groot caught Thanos’ feet in a net of solid roots.

Hulk roared and raised his fists—

Thanos snarled and flicked his fingers, and Hulk began to wither, the green fading and the muscles shrinking—

Tony swooped down and grabbed Bruce around the waist. He dodged a blast of purple and shot back upward as Rhodey took his place as air support.

As he deposited his unconscious cargo into the hands of one of the quinjet’s crew – who were on standby anyway waiting for Steve’s signal – he received the message that he had been waiting for.

“Sir, Princess Shuri has been given the go-ahead,” JARVIS said. “She’s ready.”

“Got it,” Tony replied. Trusting that JARVIS had given the message to the others as well, he immediately turned and flew to the outskirts of the perimeter they had decided upon a week or so earlier. Most of the injured soldiers had already been shifted out by Maximoff and the wizards, but Tony helped grab a few more, piling them on hoverbikes piloted by Natasha and Clint, and flying a couple to a quinjet himself before heading back inside the perimeter.

Maximoff gave the all clear, out of breath as he shifted the last wounded soldier away from the blast radius—

Wong chimed in, agreeing that the wizards had portaled out all that they could—

This time, JARVIS allowed Steve’s instruction to come through the comms.

“Now!”

At the command the very air seemed to sing as Shuri’s hastily but professionally constructed vibranium mechanisms, hidden in the desert sand, began to whirr to life. Then the secondary force-field, smaller and stronger than the first slammed into place, turning on as quick as a light switch rather than the slow coverage such shields were portrayed with in movies. There was an explosion of lightning in the middle of the dome, adding an extra layer of power that would otherwise be impossible in the desert even with the Arc-powered generator, and Tony grinned.
“Good work, Thor. Shuri, we’re up!”

Even without JARVIS’ help, he probably could have heard her and Peter’s victorious crows all the way from New York.

“Okay, Fury,” said Steve. “Your turn.”

The helicarrier shimmered into view and lit up like a beacon, and then the repulsor technology Fury had tricked out of Tony for Project Insight cracked through the air and vaporised everything that remained grounded outside the safety of the force-field. The ships that Thanos’ army had arrived in shuddered violently, cracking apart. A few of the Chitauri inside the shield screamed with pain and dropped dead on the spot, but it wasn’t enough to destroy the entire lot.

Quill’s voice came through. “Mantis, Nebula, that’s your cue!”

Tony knew that they would all do their jobs– his entire attention was on Thanos. The Mad Titan was inside the force-field, as they had fought for him to be. He was surrounded by a ring of Dora Milaje, Einherjar, and human soldiers all pointing their weapons in his direction, numbering just under a dozen in all.

Thanos surveyed them. “Clever,” he said. He appeared almost bored.

He raised his hand, and Tony could see the fear on the warriors’ faces. Yet as one, they tightened their grips, and took a step forward.

They didn’t get any further.

A flash of red and they were sinking into the ground, trapped. Then, with a smirk and a flash of the brightest orange—

It was like nothing Tony had ever seen. Ghostly images of the people in the Stone’s grasp were torn from their physical form, and as Tony watched they were sucked into the Soul Stone itself. Remembering both Strange and Loki’s explanations of astral projection, Tony shuddered in horror.

The very essence of these people, everything that made them who they were was being ripped away– and once their souls were gone, their bodies slumped against the ground. Empty.

“How are we supposed to fight against that?” he heard someone whisper. Turning his head, he saw Falcon next to him, staring horrified down at the scene below.

“We just have to stick to the plan,” Tony said. “We can do this.”

“The plan?” Sam asked weakly. Then, as his bleak eyes caught on something else below, his expression cleared. “Oh. Right.”

Following his gaze, Tony grinned as he saw that the next part of the plan was well and truly in motion.

Loki was glowing. He held his sceptre in his right hand, pointed toward Thanos. His left hand was outstretched, palm open, fingers gently curled like claws. It seemed that Loki had lost his helmet during the fight, leaving his hair to fly freely around his face. And every inch of him was glowing a soft golden yellow, his skin alight with power and his eyes shining brighter than Tony had ever seen.

Then, as one, every Outrider in the desert raised their heads and screamed.
The Stone embedded in Loki’s sceptre pulsed, and then the mindless, barely sentient drones all charged for their former master. Thanos yelled as they approached, demanding that they turn back and fight. But they were all caught in Loki’s web, and they only picked up speed as they charged. Thanos was swamped within moments, the Outriders even fighting among themselves to get closer to their new prey.

But before Tony could begin to hope, purple light shone from below the writhing mass of grey and then they all exploded outward. Time seemed to slow, the burning pieces of flesh crawling through the air and giving Thanos time to shift reality and transform what little was left of the Outriders into shards of metal that suddenly gained speed and rained down on the defenders of Earth from above.

They would have killed a significant portion of the army but a large orange portal appeared in the sky, parallel to the ground, swallowing the projectiles before they could do any harm.

With the Outriders out of the picture, only the Chitauri were left. Tony knew Loki wouldn’t be able to pull off the same trick with them. The Outriders made easy targets due to the simplicity of their minds, but the Chitauri functioned as a hive, something that the Avengers had discovered in New York, after every soldier had fallen upon the destruction of their mothership. While it may seem that this could be a good thing, that if one fell under control then so would the rest– unfortunately, it meant that there were also hundreds of minds fighting against that control at any one time. The Chitauri had all their eggs in one basket, but it was one hell of a defence mechanism, and it would take far too long to breach.

It didn’t matter. They had another plan in place for them.

Still, the Chitauri had suffered heavily in New York, and with the Outriders gone, the humans were no longer outnumbered. They weren’t swamped, and they had the time to regroup, to fight as team just as they had trained to do. Finally, they had a fighting chance.

The sounds of battle resumed on the ground as the Chitauri were forced to fight against the newly rearranged odds, but Thanos didn’t appear to be worried.

Now, he was just angry.

There was a cut on Thanos’ left shoulder oozing indigo blood, and his clothes were torn. He was covered in dust and gore and yet still he stood tall, his back straight and a smirk on his thin lips.

“So, you’ve managed to even the odds,” he said, his voice echoing across the desert just as it had in Central Park, freezing those who had never heard it before and distracting many who couldn’t afford it. “It’s not going to help.”

“Oh really?” asked Rhodey, diving down and shooting with his biggest gun. “I think you’ll find yourself corrected on that.”

Tony grinned, and lurched forward to meet his friend in the air.

Now that they were not so stupidly outnumbered, the Avengers and co. could revert their attentions to the big bad. With the Hulk out of commission they had lost one of their heaviest hitters, but they had trained for this. They knew they were capable of working together—

And despite his army, Thanos really was alone.

Tony blasted from above, then T’Challa came in from down low. Rocket used his favourite gun from a distance while Steve shielded him. Sif and Fandral were still there, their blades gleaming blue.
Then, like a conveyor belt, the ground began to move and shifted the Avengers away, making it impossible for most of them to get any closer. Tony, in the air, wasn’t affected, but then Thanos sent out a half-hearted blast of Power. Tony couldn’t get a shield up fast enough, and the energy burned through his already damaged suit. He’d lost most of the left leg now, his arms were almost entirely uncovered and he’d decided to forgo the helmet in favour of keeping as many of his repulsors online as he could.

Thor seemed to see the empty area as an opportunity, swinging Mjölnir around and flying forward at a speed that would shatter bones on impact, Titan or not. Electricity danced around his form and crackled through the air, and Tony was just considering how horrifyingly familiar the scene felt when—

The purple stream that blasted toward Thor was a horrible flashback, but this time, the Thunderer was ready. He responded with a bolt of lightning that diverted the Power Stone’s attack and pushed both contenders away, with Thor flying into Rhodey and sending the pair crashing to the ground while Thanos stumbled and nearly lost his footing.

When he saw Rhodey fall, Tony’s breath caught in his throat. But he had no time to worry about him because—

“Thanos!” Loki was standing just on the outside of Thanos’ makeshift conveyor belt, his knuckles clenched so tightly around his sceptre that they had turned white. “You’ll leave Thor alone,” he snarled, his expression twisting viciously.

Thanos adopted a look of surprise. “Will I?”

As if they were nothing more than a minor annoyance, Thanos suddenly turned and batted all of his opponents bar Loki away with little more than a flick of his fingers. Most of them swore in annoyance and got back up to try again, but Tony saw it for what it was. Unlike their other fights, Thanos had merely been playing with them. With four Infinity Stones, he could have ended the Avengers long ago— but he hadn’t come here just to kill them.

He’d come for the two remaining Infinity Stones, and the way that he was eyeing Loki hungrily proved he expected to get them.

“I destroyed your brother once before,” Thanos taunted. “Why shouldn’t I do it again?”

“I won’t let you,” Loki spat. Tony noticed the way his hand clenched as he continued. “I’ve been afraid of you for far too long. You tortured me, and you tried to take everything away from me. But no more.”

“Then I suppose you should attack me.” Thanos’ eyes gleamed as the ground around him finally stilled. No one moved. “Or are you too much of a coward?”

Loki was visibly shaking, his jaw working in anger.

The closest person to him was Fandral. “Loki,” the swordsman pleaded softly, reaching out but not touching. “Don’t. Don’t let him get to you.”

Thanos’ smirk widened, a fisherman feeling the first bite. “I thought you’d vowed to kill me, little god,” he crooned. “Where has that fire gone?”

And then Loki snarled, charging forward with vengeance etched across his face. His eyes flashed green this time, his own seiðr rising in his rage, and he didn’t bother to use the Stone. He just attacked.
Tony knew there was no way to stop him– so he flew forward as well, but he was too far away, he wasn’t going to get there in time—

No one else was moving, save for those still fighting Chitauri—

And Loki was almost there, his sceptre mere yards from tearing through Thanos’ skin, himself almost within the Titan’s reach—

And Thanos spun on the spot, ignoring the charging illusion in front of him for the real, solid person creeping up behind his back.

*Shit.*

Loki’s eyes widened at the sudden movement but he went for the kill anyway, thrusting his sceptre the rest of the way in an effort to cut Thanos’ throat.

There was a shimmer of green light from the Infinity Gauntlet and the blade’s movement was halted, frozen in time, unable to move. Then the sceptre was knocked to the side, and Thanos’ right hand curled around Loki’s neck.

“Did you really think that I would fall for the same trick twice?” Thanos asked, baring his teeth in sadistic amusement. His fist tightened as he lifted Loki in the air, causing the god to gasp desperately for a breath, his legs kicking uselessly. The sceptre fell to the ground as his fingers scrabbled at Thanos’ hand, but it was no use– Thanos was too strong, and Loki couldn’t escape his hold.

It was every nightmare Tony had ever envisioned, it was every horror Wanda Maximoff put into his mind come to life.

He knew how this ended– he’d seen it.

And he didn’t want to be left alone.

Tony hit the ground hard, unable to steady his landing with all the damage that had been done to the suit. Dust flew all around him as he struggled back to his feet. It clung to the armour and stung in his eyes, yet he couldn’t draw his gaze away from the scene in front of him.

As he watched, Thanos looked down to the sceptre lying in the sand, curling his fingers. The yellow Stone rose from the sceptre, leaving the weapon cold and dim on the ground, undamaged but for the hole in its blade.

And then the Mind Stone clicked into place, and the Gauntlet shone with the colours of five different gems.

“Only one more to go,” Thanos mused, admiring his acquisitions and almost appearing to forget about the struggling Asgardian he held by the neck in his other hand.

But Loki wasn’t going to just allow himself to be forgotten.

“You’ll– *never* find it,” he gasped, his words coarse and broken but still determined. “You’ll never __—“

“Oh, won’t I?” Thanos asked. He raised his newly decorated hand and flexed it, grinning as he did so.

Thanos was long past using just the one Stone at a time. Red and yellow seeped from his fingers,
accompanied by a surge of purple that seemed to merely spread the influence of its brethren.

Tony drew a breath, bracing himself.

And then the sounds of battle just stopped.

There was no fading away, no progression from loud to not– it was as if a switch had been flicked, or a pair of noise-cancellers had been snapped over Tony’s ears, and the sounds in the desert went from a deafening roar to eerie silence in a single instant.

Thanos could have easily used the Time Stone and frozen everyone in place if his goal was to make sure they wouldn’t interfere. It would have been easier. Arguably more effective.

But Thanos, it seemed, wanted an audience.

Einherjar, wizards, aliens, human soldiers, Avengers– rather than being frozen in the positions they had been in when the Stones did their work, all were standing tall with their hands at their sides, their expressions blank save for the looks of horror in their eyes as they were forced to watch. The Chitauri were equally affected, staring obediently at their master.

Tony turned back, surprised, now, to find that he could. For some reason, Thanos had decided to leave him free from the hold of the Reality and Mind Stones– and when Tony’s gaze was on Thanos once again, he found that the Mad Titan was looking at him, too.

“Stark,” he said.

“You still haven’t explained how you know me,” Tony said, his eyes flickering between Loki’s struggle for breath and Thanos’ amused expression.

“How?” Thanos considered, tilting his head as if surprised by the question. “You destroyed the Chitauri with a single weapon. There is talk throughout the galaxies of you outwitting the Aesir and stealing a golden apple. I was curious as to how a simple human could have achieved so much with such a short life.”

“I’m really not that interesting,” Tony replied. He wasn’t sure what he was trying to do, save perhaps fishing for time– time, though, was something he knew Loki didn’t have. Tony was desperate to think of a way out of this, but—

Even choking for air and beginning to turn blue, Loki was staring at Tony, his gasping lips mouthing indecipherable words that Tony knew regardless were pleas for trust.

But Loki was dying, how could Tony just—

“Oh, I beg to differ,” Thanos said, answering Tony’s comment. “A little mortal… who is not quite so, anymore. It would seem you have won the favour of a god.” Thanos laughed– a sharp chuckle that felt like it cut to the bone. “I saw who you went to when Thor fell, Stark. Your friend was dead, and yet… you ran to his brother.”

“Well, Thor was dead,” Tony replied, trying to sound casual. “He didn’t need me any more, but Loki—“

“Was going to get himself killed as well,” Thanos interrupted, his eyes gleaming. He flexed his fingers, causing Loki to spasm. Tony took half a step forward, his heart beating so fast that his chest was actually aching. Seeing his reaction, Thanos laughed again before adding, “And you jumped in front of him. Maybe I could understand that– you had just seen a friend die, you didn’t want to lose
anyone else. But then, on my ship, you did it once again.”

Tony swallowed hard. Loki had fought tooth and nail to make sure that Thanos didn’t realise their connection, and Tony had gone and ruined it, had brought some of Loki’s worst fears into reality.

A slight movement behind Thanos caught Tony’s gaze, and he saw Quill sneaking up from behind, hiding in the bushes just has he and Rocket had done in the exercise the week or so before. He caught Tony’s gaze, and Tony shook his head minutely. If Quill did something now, it would only make things worse.

It was hard not to let himself fall into the trap of stressing over everything that could get worse. Loki’s lips were blue, now, and his cheeks well on the way to the same. His breaths were choked as he struggled to draw in enough oxygen, his hands white against purple as they clutched at Thanos’ grip on his throat. Tony felt like he was the one with his neck in a vice. He didn’t know how long Loki could last like this, and he needed to do something—

“No matter what Asgardian fruit you may have eaten you were born a simple human, and yet you were able to build something that could withstand a blast from the Power Stone.” Thanos raised his brow expectantly. “That suit is not just metal and electricity, is it?”

Tony remained silent. There was nothing he could say now that would change the Mad Titan’s mind, and he knew exactly what Thanos would say next. There was no longer any way he could hide or believably deny how much Loki meant to him.

Offering a twisted perversion of a smile, Thanos raised his left hand and pressed his knuckles – and the brightly glowing Power Stone – against Loki’s temple.

“The Space Stone, or the Liesmith’s head. That is my offer,” Thanos said. His voice was soft, pleasant, almost like he was doing Tony a favour.

Despite his pain Loki’s green eyes were wide and pleading, begging Tony to the right thing—

And Tony didn’t hesitate.

He’d made his choice long ago.

“I’m always going to pick Loki,” Tony vowed.

He heard Loki choke out a final, desperate appeal for him stop, and Tony gritted his teeth when the plea was cut off by Thanos tightening his grip further still. The sight was horrible, he couldn’t be far now from simply snapping Loki’s neck. But Tony couldn’t look away, trying to reassure Loki with his gaze as the tattered remains of Iron Man crawled across his skin and into the Arc reactor, leaving only his right hand encased in metal.

The reactor was well built– had to be, since it was all that stood between Tony and death, even now with the shrapnel long gone. But Tony had made it himself, and knew exactly which parts to twist and push until the mechanism fell apart so that he could reach inside for the very last of the Infinity Stones. The remaining gauntlet protected him from the power of the Stone and it sat in the middle of his palm, glowing blue and bright like some terrible symbol of their very last hope.

Tony held it in the air for all to see, feeling his injured leg twinge as he stepped closer and prepared to hand it over– to put himself and the entire universe at the mercy of the Mad Titan.

Despite his confidence, Thanos seemed to be shocked at Tony’s choice, and the bright blue shine of the Space Stone reflected in Thanos’ hungry gaze as Tony stepped closer still.
As he moved, Tony thought about everything everyone had ever said about Thanos. About Loki’s claims on his arrogance, Proxima Midnight’s apparent boasts, and Nebula’s descriptions of his obsession. Maybe Thanos was arrogant enough that Tony could find a window of *something* to exploit, to pull Loki out of harm’s way that very instant. But he forced himself not to react when he saw the Infinity Gauntlet lower slightly, angling away from Loki’s head as the Titan stared greedily at the Stone in Tony’s palm.

Thanos, after all, hadn’t become as powerful as he was by acting rashly, and the moment of distraction caused by Tony unexpectedly giving in was short.

But Loki hadn’t survived as long as he had by being *slow*, and that short moment was all that he needed.

The blue tinge to Loki’s pallor had not only been due to a lack of oxygen, and it took but a second for the rest of his skin turn a deep sapphire. Thanos immediately howled from the pain of extreme, burning cold— his bare hand opened reflexively at the sudden drop in temperature and Loki sprung with his already bent knees to twist with the fall.

Bright red eyes sharpened with determined hatred as the whole battlefield looked on—

And only a moment after Tony had offered Thanos his prize, an icy blade sliced through the vulnerable flesh at the Mad Titan’s throat.
They always fall

Chapter Summary

Loki’s red eyes were on the Infinity Gauntlet, staring almost hungrily.

That, Tony thought, should probably be cause for concern.

In his final moments, Thanos looked surprised. His eyes were round, and his lips, too thin and wide to complement the oblong shape of his face, fell slack with shock. Thick purple blood was beginning to ooze from the corners of his mouth as he gaped, caught out by the graceful arc of Loki’s arm, almost appearing to feel no pain from the slash in his ruined throat which was gushing more blood than seemed possible from a single wound.

Yet still Thanos wouldn’t let go, his gold-swathed fingers curling to form a fist even as the growl and the blood bubbling between his lips turned into a harsh gurgle. Even in the throes of death, Thanos wasn’t going to go down without a fight.

Maybe he was reaching for the Soul Stone, to destroy Loki from the inside out– maybe he was after the Power Stone, to simply blast Loki away. Or maybe he was planning on reversing time, giving himself another try at destroying the Avengers.

It didn’t matter, though, because Loki wasn’t going to allow him another second of life.

There was no hesitation, no moment to pause and gloat. With his blue skin sprayed purple with blood, Loki looked like an avenging angel as he drew back his frozen blade once more and drove the tip deep into Thanos’ left eye. The ice, which Tony realised was connected to Loki's hand, snapped free as Loki yanked his arm away, his teeth bared in triumph.

There were no more gurgles after that. Thanos simply fell, hitting the ground with dull thump as the Infinity Gauntlet fell open at his side.

Tony stared for a moment, not quite believing it, yet Thanos just lay there. Quiet, unresponsive, empty.

Dead.

All around them, people began to awaken from their Stone-induced trances, and Tony became aware of returned noise. The Chitauri, though, all simply collapsed like their strings had been cut, the battle over in a single instant.

In the back of his mind, Tony was aware of JARVIS alerting everyone to the fact that Nebula and Mantis had achieved their objective– with Strange’s help, they had managed to creep into the alien spaceship to find the nexus of the Chitauri hive mind. Mantis had put the Chitauri into a deep, deep sleep, leaving only a clean-up job for those left alive in the desert. Tony took it in, recognising that he no longer had to be watching his back– but his eyes, and all of his attention, were on the person who had just won the war for them.

It was over, and they were both alive. Tony wanted nothing more than to grab Loki and go, to curl
up in a ball together and not let go for at least a solid week.

Loki looked like nothing Tony had ever seen. His skin was blue, but not smooth like Nebula’s—there were ridges that ran across his forehead and down over his cheeks, disappearing under his collar. Even covered in blood as he was, Tony could see that Loki’s lips were slightly darker blue than the rest of him. His nails were black as night, and the ridges lined his hands, too, giving the illusion that his fingers were slightly longer than Tony knew them to be. Yet despite all of the differences, he still looked like Loki—the same face, same posture, same expressions. And his eyes—

Loki’s red eyes were on the Infinity Gauntlet, staring almost hungrily.

That, Tony thought, should probably be cause for concern.

“Loki,” he said as he stepped closer, his fingers curling tightly around the remaining Stone he still held in his palm. “What are you planning on doing with that?”

Loki’s head jerked to the side, as if he had been about to look over to Tony but changed his mind at the last moment. He was refusing to even glance over, and rather than the euphoria Tony expected to have seen on Loki’s face after getting rid of the bane of their existence, he could see nothing but tension and resignation. Tony could only see his profile as he closed his eyes and seemed to steel himself. Then, apparently ignoring Tony entirely, Loki smoothly knelt on the ground beside the corpse, reaching out for the Gauntlet.

“Loki,” Tony said again, his voice cracking. This time, Loki did look over, glancing from the corner of his eye as his lips pressed tightly together. The one look said it all.

_Trust me._

Inclining his head, Tony stepped back as Loki yanked the Gauntlet from the limp hand, not being gentle or standing on ceremony. Tony wanted to watch and see what he was doing but a yell suddenly made him aware that he was not the only one left, and he was certainly not the only one to have seen the Titan fall. He turned in a hurry and saw that they had an audience, human soldiers of all different nationalities staring in equal parts victory and horror.

The humans weren’t the problem, though—for marching toward him was a pack of Einherjar, eyes full of hate as they aimed their weapons at Loki.

Tony quickly cast his gaze around for a familiar face, searching for Rhodey or Thor or even Fandral—anyone who had been close by before the fight had been frozen in its tracks. But his initial search proved useless, and he didn’t have time for anything else.

With hardly any thought for caution Tony shoved the Space Stone back into the arc reactor and replaced as much of his suit as he could, the metal groaning as it slid into place. He was still without a helmet, and most of his legs were uncovered—he wouldn’t be able to fly, but he had repulsors, at least. So there he was, with broken armour and almost no weapon systems, standing between Loki and a solid dozen angry Einherjar. He could see some human soldiers milling behind, clearly thinking about joining in, but he didn’t know what help they would be—against Asgardians, their bullets would do nothing, and he could tell they were unsure about attacking people who had been allies mere moments earlier.

“Sir, the Avengers all saw what happened, they are on their way,” JARVIS said, but Tony didn’t have the time to respond. He prepared himself for what was coming, and raised his hands, palm forward. He was exhausted, he was injured, but like hell he was going to let a single one of those fuckers put a finger on Loki.
“Stand down, Man of Iron,” one Einherji snarled. “Look at him, he’s a Frost Giant!”

“I always knew there was something wrong with him,” another Einherji growled, a sword held tightly in his hand. His armour was spattered with bits of flesh and he stunk of death, yet he appeared uninjured as he raised his weapon.

For all that Tony enjoyed making fun of them, the Einherjar were all well trained, and even the youngest had been fighting in the unit for centuries. They were beatable only because they were predictable and arrogant, but that wouldn’t help Tony any when he was outnumbered twelve to one and couldn’t even fly.

As he prepared himself Tony finally spotted a familiar face, and he almost blanched at the sight.

“Rolf?” he asked, confused as how the asshole could even be there. Thor really must have had to scrape the bottom of the barrel after the attack on Asgard– but actually, Tony doubted Thor would forgive Rolf even then. It was more likely Tyr had allowed him to re-join the Einherjar in Thor’s absence.

“There’s no robot here today, Stark,” said Rolf, his expression scared and almost appearing more reluctant than the others– though his words rang true as he said, “I told you that Loki is a monster.”

And yeah, okay. Tony got it. Asgardians were basically told from birth that Frost Giants were evil brutes, and Odin had concealed the truth. Maybe they thought Loki had hidden as a spy all this time, waiting to strike. Tony could understand indoctrination, hell, he’d seen the affect it’d had on Loki, and he knew what something of the kind had done to himself– but it was fucking possible to grow, and besides, none of it meant he’d just stand by while they said things like that.

He didn’t say a thing himself, though, too tired to try and argue with people he knew from experience were stuck in their ways. He simply raised his hands and charged his damaged repulsors, waiting.

“You’re alone, Man of Iron,” said the first Einherji. “I’ve seen you do remarkable things, but you can’t beat us this time.”

“He’s not alone.” Pushing through the ranks of Einherjar like a battering ram come to save the day, Lady Sif planted her feet at Tony’s left, and Fandral did the same to the right. “You need to stand down, Harald,” she snapped.

“How can you stand there and defend a Frost Giant?” the Einherji snapped back.

“He is Thor’s brother,” Sif retorted. “And he just saved us all.”

“You should listen to her,” said Fandral. “Not just because she outranks you, mind. I’ve seen what she does when she’s upset.”

Sif bared her teeth and growled. Hair a mess, armour scratched, and spattered with the muck of battle, she looked rather terrifying.

Tony was, well, he was slightly confused, but willing to accept any help that was offered, especially when it almost seemed that the Einherjar were willing to listen. Their eyes were darting between the three figures standing before them and the Frost Giant that they were protecting, visibly weighing up the threat.

Then, their fate was sealed when Thor, holding Rhodey in the crook of his arm, landed in their midst. He gently placed Rhodey down and took less than a second to take in the scene before him–
“You will leave Loki alone,” Thor snarled, hefting his hammer threateningly. The air felt electric as he glared at every Einherji in turn, and they all shrunk back under his gaze.

“He’s a Frost Giant,” the Einherji called Harald said weakly.

“And he is my brother,” Thor snapped. “As such, he is your prince, and you will treat him with the respect he deserves.”

As one, the Einherjar bowed their heads, listening to their king. It was impressive to watch, actually, and Tony was so, so grateful for the help.

Rhodey stumbled over to stand beside Tony, without his armour but with a gun in hand, limping heavily but otherwise looking okay. With that extra blast of relief from seeing that his best friend had survived his fall, Tony was about ready to relax— with Thor there, it was unlikely anyone was going to be able to get through to Loki. But, unfortunately—

“You will all stand down. We cannot afford to have a weapon capable of such destruction in the hands of an alien.” It was Colonel Sharpe, the idiot from before who had clearly judged Loki on his history and his mischievous antics and nothing else.

The Einherjar might be willing to listen to Thor, but Tony knew they would have no such luck with the humans. They were a stubborn lot, and weren’t going to just let an alien fiddle with the thing that had come this close to destroying them all— because yeah, they’d known before that Loki and Thor were aliens, but now that Loki looked it Tony was willing to bet that things were about to change.

It was easier to trust a face you could recognise.

Tony nearly groaned with relief when Steve came forward through the crowd, his expression almost as stormy as Thor’s.

“Leave them be,” he ordered.

“Captain,” said Sharpe. “We can’t simply allow him to—“

“Yes, you can,” said Steve, his calm yet stern Cap Voice™ doing more to calm Sharpe and his gaggle of troops than any words probably could have.

Or maybe it was the whole wounded warrior aesthetic Steve had going on.

In all seriousness, Steve was a mess. There was blood smeared across his cheeks, both his own and that of things that clearly hadn’t been human, and his incredibly durable uniform that Tony had designed himself was almost unrecognisable. One of his eyes was swollen shut and his left shoulder was quite clearly dislocated, but he still held his shield, dripping with blue gore, proudly on his right arm.

“It doesn’t matter what he’s done in the past,” Steve said. “Loki’s an Avenger, he’s one of us. And you’re not getting through him without first getting through us.”

“Oh us.” Sam, whose wings had remained mostly intact, landed next to Steve, and Clint and Natasha followed on a single stolen Chitauri hover-bike.

“He’s a known hostile—“ Sharpe tried, but was cut off by a flash of silver.
“He’s just risked his life to save this planet,” Pietro cut in, appearing from nowhere and breathing heavily, his feet no doubt rubbed raw from the number of wounded he had managed to evacuate to safety. “Just because he looks a little different now doesn’t mean he’s going to turn against us.”

“Even I had my doubts, man,” said Quill, moving through the crowd. “He worked for the wrong side once, but— so did a lot of people. I’ve done some pretty bad shit to stay alive, and he’s no different.”

“I am Groot!”

They all came forward, one by one. People who had supported Loki’s inclusion in the team from the start, and those who had taken a little longer to accept him. Everyone who remained well enough to stay on their feet joined their ranks, from T’Challa to Nebula to Strange. Even Barnes joined the growing group, standing beside Rocket and awkwardly holding his arm away from the racoon’s grabby hands.

All of them, standing between where Loki was frowning in concentration over the Infinity Gauntlet and the ranks of men who couldn’t cope with the thought of it being in the hands of the man who had once attacked them, who looked so very different from them. Not one of the Avengers seemed to mind that Loki was holding the power to destroy the universe in the palm of his hands— none of them even seemed to care that he was a different colour than he had always been. They just saw the person who had fought beside them to help save the planet – the person who had laid out a plan that worked – and if someone was going to prosecute him for his past or his species, then they were willing to shield him from it.

Tony just wished that Loki could have seen it, but he was too busy doing whatever it was with the Infinity Gauntlet.

“IT’s over,” Steve said. “Just let it end.”

Most of the soldiers stood down, glancing between themselves and clearly recognising that despite his colour change, Loki was on their side and had been the one to end the fucking fight in the first place. Everyone was tired, everyone was done. The dead still littered the ground and the vast majority of their army were already searching for friends, sifting through the corpses and hoping that they would find a breath, a pulse, anything that was worth a bit of hope.

No one wanted another fight.

Just as Sharpe let out a sigh and appeared about to back down, there was a bright flash of orange light from behind them and then, from the far left where nothing living could be seen, Tony heard a groan.

Tony would be lying if he said he didn’t take pleasure from the way that Harald gasped aloud as the previously-thought-dead Einjerhar who were stuck waist-deep in the ground began to move, breathing rapidly and jerking upright from where they had slumped into the dust after the Stone had literally stolen their souls.

Okoye cried out and ran toward her revived sisters, and a few soldiers, whether they knew the others who were stuck or not, ran to help.

But Tony’s eyes snapped back to Loki, who was still clutching the Infinity Gauntlet with both hands, though his gaze was on the figure that stood in the previously empty space between him and his erstwhile protectors.
It seemed that the dozen people stuck in the ground were not the only ones Loki had managed to bring back.

She looked like an apparition—tall, with green skin pale and translucent under the hot desert sun. Her hair was dark with a hint of a purple-pink weaved in, and there were markings on her face that glistened slightly as she moved. Lean, muscled, and with a sharp look in her eye—she was clearly a fighter, though she seemed just as shocked to be out in the desert as everyone else was to see her there. Tony had never seen her before in his life and had absolutely no clue who she was— but he didn’t have to wait long at all to find out.

“Gamora!” Quill exclaimed, running forward and reaching for her— but his hand slipped straight through her like she was nothing but a ghost, and his expression shattered.

Her lips turned up into a fond smirk, though her expression hardened quickly into desperation.

“Vormir,” she said, her voice little more than a harsh whisper on the breeze. “Peter, get to Vormir!”

Despite his obvious distress, Quill raised a brow and barked a half-hearted laugh. His voice was almost whiny as he asked, “Or what?”

“I’ve still got a few knives on me,” Gamora snapped, “If you think that I can’t find my own way off that rock—“

“I’ll be there,” Quill said, his eyes far too bright and a little watery. “I’ll come get you.”

“So will I.” Nebula’s tense tone was at odds with her vulnerable expression, something far too soft for the mechanical face her father had forced upon her.

Gamora’s wistful gaze lingered on her sister for a moment, but she was still fading fast, and when she was almost entirely gone she turned around to look at Loki.

Tony couldn’t see exactly what was exchanged between them, but he thought that maybe it was some kind of an apology. He hoped it was.

She only lasted a few more seconds, and then Gamora was gone, fading away— but not for good. She and everyone else seemed to believe that she was headed back to her body, alive now that Loki had released her from the Soul Stone. Quill remained frozen for a while, staring at the spot where Gamora had vanished. Then his expression hardened into determined resolve, and he turned his gaze to Steve expectantly.

“I need to repair the Milano immediately,” Quill said.

“I’m already on it, Quill,” Rocket jumped in. “Honestly, what did you think I was doing these past few weeks?”

“I thought you were helping with the shields—“

“I can multitask!”

Caught up in the emotion of it all, Tony glanced over to Loki, half expecting to meet his gaze again, but Loki was looking away. He was on his feet, now, the gauntlet nowhere to be seen and his posture entirely closed off. But rather than leave him to his no-doubt toxic thoughts, Tony stored his abused armour for what he hoped would be the final time and crossed the few steps needed to reach his lover.
Loki finally glanced up at Tony’s approach, and upon noticing his closeness, he winced.

Recognising what Loki was about to do, Tony shook his head.

“Wait.”

Slowly, Tony reached up to brush his fingers against Loki’s still blue cheek. Loki flinched away initially, but Tony just waited— he knew it wasn’t his touch that Loki feared. Loki had never touched another being in that skin without the intention to harm, and now he was afraid of hurting Tony.

“Anth—” Loki cut himself off with a wince, squeezing his eyes shut. Tony frowned, but found the problem immediately, and felt like an idiot and a fucking insensitive bastard for not seeing it earlier.

Loki’s neck was already beginning to blossom with deep indigo bruises, the shape of thick fingers clearly imprinted upon his skin. For the first half a moment after he saw them, Tony felt angry— but then he was just glad. Remembering what Loki had gone through… Tony was just overwhelmingly relieved that it hadn’t been a whole lot worse.

Still, Tony didn’t need words to interpret the edge of anxiety etched across Loki’s face. Tony wasn’t the only one aware that this was the first time he had seen Loki wear the skin he was born with.

Yet, Loki was still there. Not so long ago this would have had him running for the hills, but it seemed that even though he wasn’t able to curb his knee-jerk reaction, he trusted Tony enough to stay.

Tony was only too happy to prove to Loki that the trust was well-earned.

“I’ve told you,” Tony said softly. “Just because you’re a Jötunn—”

“Jö** tunn,**” Loki echoed, correcting Tony’s pronunciation. And it was then that Tony realised he’d never actually heard Loki say the word before. In the few times that he’d spoken about his true heritage, Loki had always referred to himself as, if not a **monster,** then a Frost Giant— the term that the Asgardians had used to refer to their most hated enemy. Tony had heard Loki use the term ‘Jötnar’ once, and had done his research online of course and found that and ‘Jötunn’ used most often in the mythology, but humans only knew so much—

But maybe this change in Loki’s vocabulary meant he had taken a step in the right direction.

“Just because you’re Jötunn, it does **not** mean that you’re a monster,” Tony finished.

“You just— saw me kill—,” Loki croaked, his eyes darting down to the corpse on the ground, which seemed smaller now than it had in life. His hand reached up to touch his own cheek, still wet with purple blood, and the rest of Loki’s sentence was clear.

“I’ve watched you kill lots of things, sweetheart,” Tony replied.

Loki’s expression darkened, and Tony knew he wasn’t thinking about the Chitauri and Outriders that Tony had been referencing.

“Loki.” The corner of Tony’s mouth began to curve up of its own accord. “You can’t honestly expect me to be upset that you’ve killed **Thanos.**”

Slowly, a familiar spark of mischief entered those bright red eyes. “I did, didn’t I?” he said, matching Tony’s grin. His voice was still croaky and broken, and the action was clearly hurting him— but still, Loki laughed, the joy of finally being **free** breaking through his insecurities and the injuries and
bubbling to the surface.

Tony reached out once again, and this time Loki leaned into his touch, pulling Tony in until their arms were tight against each other’s backs and their bodies were pressed together as closely as possible. They didn’t care that they were covered in grime, that they stank of sweat and other, far worse things. They simply held each other.

“I’ve told you before that I don’t care what you are,” Tony said, pressing his cheek to Loki’s skin gently, wary of the bruises. “Seeing it makes no difference. You’re still Loki to me, and I’ll always love you.”

“I know,” Loki whispered, and Tony was glad to realise that Loki meant it.

He buried further into Loki’s hold, relishing in the familiarity despite the way that everything felt so new. Loki’s skin was always cool, but in this form he felt several degrees colder still. He wasn’t freezing, not like Loki clearly thought he would be– and in the heat of the desert, it was refreshing more than anything else, like pressing your face against a cold metal beam on a hot summers’ day. His skin was mostly smooth, though Tony could feel the ridges against his cheek. His ever-curious mind wondered what they were– were they biological, or had they been carved into him at birth, like a ritual? Did they mean something? Were they like a fingerprint, or did they relate to his ancestry, or were they simply features, like a human’s hair colour or skin tone?

But then Loki shifted, pressed his cool lips against the side of Tony’s neck, and he decided that in that moment he didn’t really care. He just melted into Loki’s arms, doing his best to ignore the outside world and the stench of blood that slowly got worse as the heat grew stronger, the day beginning to slip into the afternoon.

The longer they stood there, basking in their victory and in the simple fact that they were still alive, the more Tony became aware of the aches and pains the battle had left him with. His leg was all but threatening to give out on him and his head hurt like hell, but he didn’t want to move. He wouldn’t be the one to pull away—

But he was leaning more and more heavily upon his lover, and it was only a matter of time before Loki pulled back, just far enough to inspect Tony’s face.

Despite himself, Tony couldn’t help but sigh as Loki gently touched his fingers to Tony’s temple, running his hand through his hair, wet with more than just sweat. Tony hadn’t even noticed the blood running across his brow. Consequences of deciding to fight without a helmet, he supposed.

“But there are loads of people who need attention more than me,” Tony replied, refusing to move away even so much as an inch. “I’ll heal.”

Loki, predictably, looked like he wanted to argue. No blue skin or red eyes could possibly change that expression– but Tony knew that he could. So he leaned in, and uncaring of the blood, of the cold, of the crowd, of anything, he pressed his lips against Loki’s in a sweet, unhurried kiss.

There were people talking around them, discussing what would happen with the large purple corpse, what would be done with the Stones, the wounded, the dead. But Tony paid no attention to any of it, swept up in the euphoria of the end of it all, in the knowledge that they had made it through, that now, for the first time in years, they were truly safe.
As the rest of the world fell away, Tony was happy to just take a single quiet moment to focus on the important things.

They were alive, and that was all that mattered.

The dispersal of the troops from the Mojave desert was one hell of a complicated operation— even more so than getting them there in the first place. The urgency and desperation had all dissipated, leaving only the usual slog of politics and strained international relations, hardly warmed at all by aid given in a time of crisis. It was really difficult to get that many troops out of the USA, especially when there were bodies of the fallen to repatriate, as well as wounded that couldn’t be moved without endangering their health. It was an absolute logistical nightmare—

Or, well. So Tony heard.

The moment the conversation had turned to politics, Tony had nudged Steve enough times to get him to start convincing people to let them go home. Loki seemed to enjoy the chaos of it all, but even he recognised the need for rest— the fact that Tony had started to sway from blood loss and dehydration probably had something to do with his agreement, and for once Tony wasn’t going to complain about being looked after. He just wanted his bed.

And, hopefully, a shower.

Not necessarily in that order.

The missing Infinity Gauntlet, unfortunately, didn’t really help matters. When the army had the time to take a breath of air they complained, and then Ross complained, and then the Council phoned up to complain, and then all of a sudden the Avengers were fielding a whole heap of complaints and no actually viable suggestions as to who should keep hold of the damn thing.

But then, in broken words, Loki said he wouldn’t hand it back over to the humans, and it looked like Loki was about to go back on the active threat list when the Avengers came together and spoke in his favour. Loki already having the Gauntlet in his possession actually helped in the end, since getting it off him was a task the army didn’t really want to undertake when the Avengers were all on Loki’s side. Plus, Loki had signed the offworlder subsection of the Accords, and therefore was protected under the same rights as everyone else on the team.

The multiple eye-witness accounts – from literally everyone who had been in that section of the desert, thanks to the Titan’s manipulations – of what had happened was impossible to dispute. It had undeniably been a team effort, but Loki was the one who struck the final blow, and that went a long way to convincing the higher-ups that Loki was trustworthy. Plus, with the King of Asgard backing their corner, it was hard for the politicians to say no.

The discussion of what would be done with the Stones was a frustrating conversation, but so long as Loki didn’t use them for planetary invasion, he was allowed to keep the Infinity Gauntlet.

For now.

But all of that was something to worry about later— they had people to look after. No one on the team had died, but there had been more than a few close calls. Hope was the worst off, and Tony was already dreading the call from her father— but she was alive, and she would recover. Scott was in bad shape with one hell of a concussion and a terrible craving for oranges. Rhodey had broken his leg, Natasha had a broken arm, and Steve was being admitted for observation on account of his own
concussion. Bruce, of all of them, was entirely uninjured, and he was running around like a mother hen trying to make sure they all saw some kind of medical professional.

Tony just wanted to escape, and he found that it wasn’t hard to do so.

There were benefits to knowing a guy who could teleport, after all.

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It was less than a day since the last time Tony had curled up in Loki’s arms, but it felt like a lifetime. Since returning to Malibu – it was closer than New York – Tony hadn’t been able to stop touching him. There was nothing sexual about it, just a deep, desperate need to run his hands over every inch of Loki’s pale skin, assuring himself that it was real, that it was over, that they had both survived. And from the way that Loki’s fingers kept trailing lightly across the still healing laceration on his leg, Tony could tell that he felt exactly the same way.

It was quiet, unhurried- a night of reconnection and reassurance, two people simply grateful and overjoyed for everything they had managed to overcome. Every kiss was both a thank you and a promise, and, despite everything, for the first time in weeks Tony slept the night through.

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The Milano was almost already repaired, and Tony estimated that it would only take the combined efforts of himself, Shuri, Quill, Rocket, and an entirely too enthusiastic but probably moderately helpful Peter the better part of one week to make it space-worthy.

It was weird, though, because when they went to go and look at it the morning after the day of the battle, it was completely fixed, good as new– in fact, it was looking exactly as it had before Rocket had flown it into one of the Outriders’ dropships in Central Park.

Entirely, totally weird, actually, since there was only one thing Tony could think of that could have achieved that, and because not only was Loki most definitely not supposed to be using the Infinity Stones, and not only had he mentioned several times how much he despised using them, but he’d also strongly warned against using that particular Stone for frivolous things.

Yet, there they all were, waving the Guardians goodbye only a day after the battle as they set off toward Vormir.

Mantis was teary-eyed and insisted on hugging everyone, which was only slightly worrying, while Drax merely gave them all a terse wave, thanked Loki for avenging his wife and daughter, and for leaving enough of the Titan’s corpse so that Drax could get his own small revenge with a solid kick to the head.

“If you ever need help with anything else,” Quill said as he shook Tony’s hand, “then—“

“Don’t call us,” Rocket replied, walking up the ramp with hardly a look. “This planet sucks.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Steve tried, and Rocket paused just before the door.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, glancing back down. “Nice meeting you too, I guess.” His eyes scanned the group below, and rested on Barnes. “Are you sure—“

“No,” Barnes snapped. “Now get out of here, racoon.”

Rocket shook his head in obvious dismay, but his lips were stretched into a smirk as he finally
entered the ship.

Nebula exchanged a few words with Barnes as well before she left, and she gave everyone else a firm nod before following her teammates. Tony had long since given up expecting a thank you from her, though. He figured it wasn’t because she was ungrateful, but rather because she could have escaped on her own, given enough time and opportunity. It was possible that in her mind, there was no reason for the thanks when the outcome was the same.

Not everyone thought the same way, though, and when Quill moved along the line, Steve shook his hand firmly.

“Thank you,” Steve said, and Tony found himself nodding in agreement. “We couldn’t have done it without your help.”

“Well, hey,” said Quill, shrugging. “He was trying to destroy half the universe, which would mean destroying half the galaxy. We couldn’t have just let him.” He winked. “I’ve grown a bit attached to the name.”

“As group names go, it’s a good one,” said Sam, pulling a face. “Who chose Avengers, anyway? You do realise that in order to be able to Avenge something, it has to be destroyed first—“

“Take it up with Fury,” said Tony. Or had it been Coulson’s idea?

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Loki, glancing at Tony with unsuppressed mirth. “I quite like it.”

“Ah, yes,” Tony sighed. “I love being reminded of that time you threw me out of a window.”

Even as the others snickered, Tony felt Loki’s fingers brush the inside of his wrist, and smiled.

“Just don’t forget that we helped,” Quill said sternly. “And if they make a movie of us, I want to be played by Kevin Bacon.”

Clint snorted. “He’s, um—“

“I’m sure he would be honoured,” said Tony, and Quill narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Otherwise,” Quill finished. “Rocket’s right. Don’t bother keeping in contact, I already forgot all your names.”

“I am Groot,” Groot said cheerfully.

Thor grinned. “Thank you, my friend,” he said, and from that, and Quill’s joking complaints about traitors, Tony figured they’d just received an actual invitation to call on the Guardians if they were needed.

Hopefully, they never would be, but Tony couldn’t help but feel like he hadn’t seen the last of the rag-tag team.

“Hey, Stark,” said Quill, pausing just as he moved to enter the Milano. “Just make sure those Stones never fall into the wrong hands again.”

“Don’t worry,” Tony swore. “They won’t.”

Despite the fact that almost entirely all of Tony’s experiences with spaceships had been bad ones, he found that there was something rather captivating about watching the Milano take off and soar up into the sky, travelling further and faster than anything from Earth ever had. One day, he knew, he
would build something like that.

But as the Milano vanished from sight and everyone else began to disperse, Tony had just the one question on his mind.

“Hey, Loki,” Tony said as the others dispersed, his eyes remaining on the spot where the Guardians had disappeared from sight. “Let’s say, hypothetically, that someone fixed the Milano—“

“Hypothetically?” Loki checked, arching an unimpressed eyebrow to show that he was far above such games.

“Of course.”

“Well, I suppose that it is possible someone used the Time Stone to reverse the damage done to the ship,” Loki mused. “With enough care, it could be done without damaging the time-stream, so long as no living thing was directly affected and that the proper care was taken to end the reversal and stop the flow of energy in the right place so as to avoid a time loop.”

“Hypothetically, though, right?” Tony teased. “There’s no way the person currently in possession of the Time Stone would do something so reckless, let alone so nice.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Hypothetically,” he drawled, “it won’t be long before they discover that their food-heater turns everything they put in it into those horrible Pop-Tart things that Thor eats, and that their shower turns anyone who uses it a rather interesting shade of orange.”

Tony let out an incredulous laugh, and Loki grinned.

“They may have helped, but Quill did call me an ass-kissing git,” Loki said. “No one calls the Prince of Asgard names and gets away with it.” He side-eyed Tony, his eyes gleaming. “Hypothetically, of course.”

Tony burst into full-blown chuckles. “Of course.”

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It had taken more than a little wriggling to get the Council to agree to letting the Avengers destroy the Stones.

It was, obviously, the logical thing to do. Several civilisations across several solar systems had tried hiding them away in the safest places they could, and yet they had all been found. Destroying them was the only way to be sure.

Of course, some members of the UN argued that the Stones should be used— that they could end the energy crisis, that they could end world hunger, that they could solve any and every problem the world had ever or could ever face. But the reality of the situation remained etched in the fact that humans had been in possession of the Tesseract, and had used it to make weapons. The Aether had also been used as a weapon, and the Power Stone had never been used for anything else. They’d all seen what the Soul Stone could do, the things that the Mind Stone could be used for was the literal stuff of nightmares, and the Time Stone? Well.

The dangers far outweighed the possible benefits, for no matter how many lives they could save, the potential for destruction would always be so much worse.

But the politicians and the scientists had already lost one opportunity they had hoped to gain from the fight. Just as they had after Central Park, the dead Outriders had melted into blue-grey goop a few
hours after death, and the Einherjar had made off with all the still living Chitauri. A more humanitarian person might have worried about what was going to be done with them if it hadn’t been for the not-at-all-suspicious smirk on Thor’s face whenever anyone mentioned it (Tony had never seen Loki look so proud), but to be honest, he hadn’t really cared in the first place. Sure, he agreed that it would be bad for Chitauri tech to get into the wrong hands – there was a reason he’d created the DODC, and their run in with the Vulture had proved both why that had been necessary and that it hadn’t bloody worked. But if the Einherjar already had advanced tech beyond what the Chitauri were capable of, and were only planning on taking the Chitauri for revenge– well. After all they’d done, Tony wasn’t nice enough to give a damn. Thor, though, wouldn’t let that happen, so it was a moot point anyway.

Regardless, the humans had lost the chance to study living aliens– they were reluctant to give up the Stones as well.

Then, of course, some brave politician suggested that they use the Stones just for a bit before destroying them.

Steve didn’t say it, but Tony knew the thought must have crossed his mind. A bit would always turn into a bit more, and if they weren’t gone immediately– the Stones would stick around. No matter how pure a person you were, temptation would win out– if not for you, then for the person poised to steal them.

No, Steve was too good and far too tactful to call them out on their own humanity, but what he did say was no less undeniable.

“We don’t want to bring more attention to Earth than necessary,” Steve had told the Council, flanked by Tony and Thor and standing tall and imposing over the lot of them. “Right now, everyone knows we have the Stones, and they’ll be coming for us. If we destroy them, the word will get out– but if we use them first, even with the best interests at heart, the doubt will always remain.

“We need to destroy them now, with Thor as witness. We need to make sure everyone knows that these Stones are gone for good, because if we don’t? What happened in the desert will only be the beginning.”

But of course, that only left them with the problem of how– and who.

The Avengers were in agreement, though, and with representatives of two Realms, as well as two monarchs in attendance and Thor’s assurances that the process would be dangerous for mere mortals, in the end the Council found it difficult to refuse them.

They would have to video the whole thing to give to Ross, but Tony considered it a win.

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The Power Stone, Loki said, was one of the easiest to control, because it’s motivations were so simple. While it could be used for, well, anything that could be achieved through the manipulation of power, to use it for something complicated, to energise or to bring life, would have required far more fortitude. But when it was used to destroy?

Well.

As long as you were strong enough to withstand its effects, all you had to do was aim.

With Tony, Thor, T’Challa, and Steve as his witnesses, Loki carefully pried four of the Infinity Stones from the Gauntlet, leaving only the bright purple gem.
They’d moved to a remote location to do it, and were glad that they had.

They destroyed the Soul Stone first, not wanting it to be in existence for any longer than necessary, not after what they’d seen it do.

Loki held the Gauntlet in both hands, his brow creased in concentration. Thor took hold of Loki’s shoulder, and Steve did the same with Tony, with T’Challa next to Steve at the end of the line. The four of them together, and with the balancing influence of the Gauntlet, was more than enough to control the Power Stone, and the Soul Stone shattered into a thousand shining pieces, scattering across the forest floor. The force of it shook them all but they remained on their feet, the power coursing through them.

Next went the Mind Stone. Despite the power-up it granted, Loki was all too happy to see it destroyed, as it would always remain the symbol of all that the Mad Titan had done to him. Tony didn’t watch it break– instead, he kept his eyes on Loki’s relieved smile.

Time and Reality went soon after, with Thor watching stony faced as the red gem shattered. Strange hadn’t been happy that he wouldn’t be present to see the end of the Eye of Agamotto, but he’d claimed that he’d probably have a better time explaining why the most prized possession of the Hogwarts League had been destroyed if he hadn’t actually witnessed said destroying.

And then, there were two.

They had known that it would be near impossible to destroy all the Stones– they were the most powerful items in the universe after all. Nothing was capable of destroying such power other than the power itself. But if they had to pick one to remain, it couldn’t be the Power Stone. The Guardians’ story of what had nearly happened on Xandar, and then what had been done to the planet in the fight to obtain it, proved that the Stone was simply too dangerous to risk falling into the wrong hands.

So Loki placed the Gauntlet on the ground, and then, it was Tony’s turn.

As Tony’s suit closed up around him, he dug deep into the power that had almost become familiar, now. It was easy to feel the energy coursing through his veins, and a simple matter to focus on all the tiny spaces between the atoms that made up the Stone itself. The Stone seemed to understand exactly what he was trying to do, and it only took a small push for the space between the atoms of the Power Stone to expand at an exponential rate, and the Power Stone disintegrated into nothing.

Unfortunately, none of them had considered what to do with the final Stone once it was the only one left.

“Maybe we could hide it,” T’Challa suggested, though his tone of voice indicated that he knew it wasn’t the best of ideas.

“I’m not burying it,” Tony said immediately. “I have watched Jumanji way too many times to even consider that as a viable option—”

“We can’t leave it in human hands.” Steve’s expression was blank, yet there was pain in his gaze that spoke of darkness. “I’ve seen what the Tesseract was capable of.”

“We’ve all seen it,” T’Challa said darkly. “I wasn’t there, but I’ve seen the footage of what happened in New York. That power in the wrong hands?”

There was a pause.

“Perhaps,” Thor mused, “If Loki freezes it and then I hit it with my hammer—”
“You know that won’t work,” Loki muttered. “But maybe we can hide it, somewhere no one will ever be able to find it.”

“You’re talking about throwing it into Ginnungagap,” said Thor.

“That will work,” Loki snapped.

“Permanently?” asked Steve.

“Nothing can be said for sure,” Loki replied. “Not even that the Stones have been destroyed.”

Tony frowned. “What?”

“Maybe they’ll reform one day,” Thor agreed. “Or maybe not. They are the most powerful items in the universe. I suppose anything is possible. We were taught that they were impossible to destroy.”

“But at least for now, they’re not ours to worry about,” Tony said. “If we destroy them all, and scatter the pieces—“

“That’s the safest option.” Loki considered Tony’s expression carefully. “You have an idea.” It wasn’t a question– it was a statement of fact, and Tony didn’t bother gracing it with an answer.

He’d destroyed the Power Stone by breaking it down to its atoms, and that had only taken a moment. The thing hadn’t even exploded, not like something of that magnitude probably should have. The Space Stone was made up of atoms as well, and it could be destroyed in the same way.

This time, though, the Space Stone fought.

Not quite sentient my ass. It didn’t want to join its brethren, and its energy gnashed against Tony’s will with more strength than it even had in the beginning. Tony tried to work with it as he had before, not forcing but guiding it to follow his direction. But the thing would not bend, and it felt like maybe Tony would be the first to break.

Then Tony felt a hand on his shoulder, cool and supportive, a solid presence at his side. Loki didn’t have the Mind Stone any more– they couldn’t connect the way they once had, and this wasn’t like using the Power Stone. This wasn’t a simple shared burden. But Tony felt Loki’s presence, his seiðr wrapping around his very being, and it gave him the strength to keep on fighting. By working together, he and Loki were able to wrest control and use the power of the Space Stone one last time.

The final act of the Tesseract’s heart, the one thing that had brought them all together, was to destroy itself.

“It seems almost anticlimactic,” T’Challa said, staring down at the pile of glittering dust on the ground. “That’s the potential end of the universe, sitting right there at our feet.”

“And we beat it,” Tony said firmly. “Ready, Reindeer Games?”

After giving Tony a firm nod, Loki gathered the dust with a spell, and then he vanished, off to spread the remains of the Stones across the branches of Yggdrasil, scattering them into the void between worlds just as Thor had suggested they do with the Space Stone. Even if Thor’s worrying thought was right and they did reform, it would be impossible for anyone but a skywalker to retrieve them—and Loki was the best.

Usually, Tony had a constant pit of anxiety bubbling away at the back of his mind, constantly asking the what if. But for once, it truly felt like the end of something, and Tony knew that his promise to
Quill would be fulfilled.

The Infinity Stones wouldn’t be bothering anyone ever again.
Epilogue: Beginning's end.

Chapter Summary

It was crazy and chaotic and perfect, and it was something Tony knew he never could have ever found with anyone else. They just fit, and Tony had never looked forward to the rest of his life more than he did when he was with Loki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The penthouse was quiet, but Tony knew that quiet could be misleading. The sun had been setting earlier in the day now that fall had taken hold, and the combination of the light streaming in through the windows and the furniture casting too-long shadows meant that everything looked dangerous. He didn’t have many options, though—putting his back to the window would be mistake, as he wouldn’t be able to check the balcony, yet if he kept his gaze toward the sunlight he wouldn’t be able to see the rest of the room. He moved slowly, managing to avoid bumping his shins through sheer familiarity of his route, heading for the bar where he would be able to at least put his back to a wall. This was why it was a good idea to carry sunglasses around at all times, whether one was inside or not. (Well. That and the press, but of all the things likely to be in his penthouse, they were comfortably low on the list.)

“J?” he asked, before he was even halfway there. He’d decided to risk the noise as his eyes became too squinty to discern whether the shape in in the corner was indeed the bookshelf Loki insisted upon, or whether it was something more sinister.

“The coast is clear, Sir,” JARVIS replied, half-amused.

“Are you sure?”

“Sir.” JARVIS’ voice was fond in a way that had Tony huffing in annoyance. “Would I lie to you?”

His initial response was to simply accept that statement, but a second later Tony narrowed his eyes. That particular tone of voice was one that JARVIS used when Tony asked a rhetorical question, or when the AI thought Tony was being particularly reckless. It was his sarcastic voice.

Before he could voice his suspicions, something solid collided with his side and pushed him over. Tony yelped as he was shoved right over the back of the couch, landing on the seat with a thump. He tried to squirm from under the weight on top of him but strong arms curled around his waist, holding him in place, and a familiar laugh pressed against his hair. It wasn’t a snicker or a cackle, but peals of bright, delighted laughter, the kind that seemed to lighten the mood of any room and could just make anyone listening want to join in.

“Note for future reference,” Tony muttered, relaxing into Loki’s arms even as he shot a squinty glare at the nearest hidden camera. “JARVIS lies.”

“Are you asking me to make that note, Sir?” JARVIS asked innocently. “Or are you truly talking to yourself this time?”
“Definitely myself,” Tony agreed. “I clearly can’t trust anyone else around here.”

There was pause, and Tony nearly managed to keep a straight face, but made the mistake of turning his head and looking up at Loki. He was still grinning as he leant over Tony, and his green eyes were glinting with such a perfect mixture of pride and delight that Tony couldn’t have held it against the two of them if he’d tried.

“Don’t blame JARVIS,” Loki said. “I wasn’t even cloaking myself. You know, I’ve seen quite a few Midgardians your age wearing spectacles—“

“Oh, shush, you,” Tony sighed, shifting so his head was more comfortable against the armrest of the couch. Loki, the bastard, merely grinned down at him beatifically. “It’s just the angle of the sun through the windows, all right? I totally would have seen you coming otherwise.”

“JARVIS?” Loki asked, and the sunlight finally dimmed to a manageable level as a dark tint blossomed across the glass. Oranges and yellows and blues all smoothed together, the tint making it possible to look yet not diminishing the beauty of the picture at all. It felt peaceful in a way that nothing had in a while.

With so many people living in the Tower– with so many moving pieces like cogs in a machine that never paused to take a breath, moments like these were rare. Not that Tony disliked having them all in his space– it was great, honestly. While most had spread out and gone their own separate ways, they all still used Avengers’ Tower as a base of operations, or even just somewhere to hang out with friends. With Loki’s help they’d even managed to patch in a communications system to the Guardians. They’d almost become something like a family, eating meals together and training and just generally enjoying the company.

It’s just that sometimes… finding a moment alone was hard.

Tony and Loki were nothing if not determined, though, and there was never a challenge that they couldn’t overcome. Loki had devised a cunning plan and made an offhand comment about how Clint could never beat him in a fair game of capture the flag, and hardly an hour later every Avenger in the vicinity had assembled for another city-wide game.

(Tony was not going to think about the parallels to parents who send their kids to summer camp or girl scouts. Hell, there were no parallels.)

Within five minutes of the starting gun, Tony and Loki’s flags had been shoved through one of Loki’s secret paths and were, according to Loki, “probably somewhere half-way between Asgard and Niflheim,” which Tony’s trusty knowledge of Norse Mythology roughly translated to mean ‘they could be literally anywhere in the universe, who the fuck cares.’ And since the rules laid out by way of raucous debate (see: excitable yelling) stated only that nobody could leave the boundaries of NYC, they technically weren’t even cheating.

They’d run in opposite directions at the start so as to avoid suspicion, and had decided to head back to the penthouse once they’d lost any possible tails. Still, Tony wouldn’t have put it past Peter to try and follow him to get one up in the game, but it seemed that JARVIS had been right. Save for Loki scaring the living daylights out of him, the penthouse really was clear, and hopefully the whole Tower would stay that way until the end of the game.

Deciding to make the most of the limited time they had, Tony tilted up his chin and caught Loki’s lips with his own. Loki responded eagerly, resting his elbows either side of Tony’s head and his whole weight on Tony’s chest as he leaned down to deepen the kiss, flicking the tip of his tongue across Tony’s mouth with unbridled enthusiasm. Tony slid his arms down to rest on Loki’s
waist, drawing him close and then—

It was Loki’s turn to yelp as he landed on the rug with a thump. He glared up at Tony from the ground, his nose wrinkled in annoyance and his hair in complete disarray.

“Turnaround’s fair,” Tony said, trying not to laugh.

Instead of irritation, Loki’s face bloomed with challenge. “Oh is it?” he asked.

Immediately regretting every decision ever, Tony began to wriggle further down the couch and out of Loki’s reach, but he wasn’t fast enough and soon found himself where Loki had been a moment before, with Loki leaning over him again. He was pinned down on the rug without a hope of escape, and—well, he didn’t really mind.

He only got a quick glimpse of a smirk before Loki was kissing him again, nipping with a playfulness that had Tony smothering a laugh against his lips. Tony lifted his hands to thread them through Loki’s hair, but before he’d moved an inch they were caught in Loki’s vice-like grip. Tony pulled back just enough to pout, and Loki arched an eyebrow.

Okay, whatever. Tony would just have to distract him again.

Yet he was quickly consumed as every touch burned his skin, igniting that familiar desire that had never, would never dim. It didn’t take long before Loki’s hands found better things to do, one sliding under Tony’s shirt while the other ran down past his waist and cupped Tony’s aching erection through his jeans. Tony gasped but maintained enough brain function to lift his own hands and finally bury his fingers in that black hair, tugging just enough to draw a moan from his lover while simultaneously arching up and grinding with his hips.

As Loki’s eyes fell closed Tony seized the chance, flipping them over so that he was on top, pressing the full length of his body against Loki’s. Green eyes gleamed defiantly, and then Loki surged up and met Tony’s lips halfway, battling to gain control once again.

What they shared was playful and scattered with laughs, but only all the more passionate for it. They shoved and bit but their devotion bled through every look, every movement. Between scratches and giggles there would be a moment of gentleness, half a second of fingers caressing skin with a tenderness that spoke louder than words ever could. It was intoxicating, it was crazy and chaotic and perfect, and it was something Tony knew he never could have ever found with anyone else. They just fit, and Tony had never looked forward to the rest of his life more than he did when he was with Loki.

The room grew dark around them and JARVIS kept the lights at a warm level, and after, they stayed curled around each other, wrapped in a dark green blanket that Tony might have suspected of being a cape if it hadn’t been so perfectly soft. Maybe it had been a cape, once. Living with Loki, the lines always became a little blurred.

They leant up against the couch, pressed together and still looking out at the bright lights of the bustle of the city, revelling in the simplicity of just being together. But with the darkness came the reminder of the ticking clock that they would never truly be free of.

“They’ll all be heading back soon,” Tony said, remembering that Steve had adamantly refused to extend the game’s time limit and risk breaking Peter’s curfew. Even Captain America held a healthy respect for Aunt May.

Loki hummed, a low sound that Tony knew meant that the cogs of that brilliant mind were turning.
“We could go, you know,” Loki said after a moment, his voice wistful. “Find somewhere quiet. There’s so much beyond this planet, and it can be peaceful out there, if you know where to look.”

Tony twisted to catch Loki’s eye. “You sound like you miss it.”

Loki glanced down and looked at Tony seriously. “There’s also a lot of noise, and it’s stressful, always constantly moving. I quite like being able to relax, here, for now. But when the time comes, I’ll be glad to move around again, travel the stars. It’ll be nice to see them again, with someone else.”

Tony raised a brow, though he couldn’t wipe away his grin. “Oh, you’re taking someone else?” he asked.

“You’ll come with me,” Loki said with not an inch of doubt.

“You couldn’t survive peaceful, and you know it,” Tony teased. “You’d be bored in a day.”

“I could, if you were there,” Loki said. Despite the fact that it was probably the sappiest thing Tony had ever heard, his chest bloomed with warmth. Still, he couldn’t let the opportunity pass and was about to make a comment, but— “Of course, nothing would remain peaceful for long with you in the equation,” Loki finished.

“Hey, you’re the one that’s literally got chaos in your name,” Tony shot back. “That’s not just on me.”

"Perhaps," Loki agreed. "But if we compare years lived to incidents of—"

“Maybe we should try it, then. Make an experiment of it— hypothesis, Loki attracts more trouble than Tony does.”

“I think we already know who would win,” Loki said haughtily. “I am far more—“

“I think the two of you being in the same place would compound the effect,” JARVIS interrupted. “You are both magnets for dangerous situations. Trying to keep the pair of you safe is a full-time job.”

“We could survive on our own, JARVIS,” Loki huffed, though he couldn’t hide his smile.

“Stop vying for wages, J, you know I pay you in love and updated firewalls,” Tony said.

“I update my own firewalls, Sir,” JARVIS replied.

Tony rolled his eyes fondly, and turned back to his lover. “We should still do it,” he said. “Could be fun.”

Loki nodded slowly, his expression pensive. “Just… not yet.” He flashed a short grin. “We’ve got years to see the universe, and I am not done with the Avengers.”

“You’re not just talking about being on the team,” Tony guessed, amused despite himself.

“Barton has grown far too comfortable in this Tower,” Loki said in complete seriousness. “He’s going to grow complacent if someone doesn’t help him out.”

“Oh, definitely,” Tony agreed. “I guess the Einherjar are at least unlikely to show up again, now that Thor’s in charge up there.”

When Loki’s eyes began to glitter and the corners of his lips pulled up in his trademarked smirk,
Tony just sighed. At least, he supposed, he’d never have to worry that his life would ever be boring, regardless of how long it might last. But rather than immediately running off to cause mischief and terrrорise some poor palace guards, Loki instead settled further under the blanket. Tony sighed happily as Loki curled tighter around him, his arms circling Tony’s waist and holding on almost possessively as he pressed a kiss to Tony’s temple.

“Delaying your reign of terror, are you?” Tony asked fondly, happy to settle back into Loki’s hold, uncaring that the team would be coming back soon, that they were likely to be interrupted. Let them come. Tony was perfectly happy where he was.

"Actually," Loki drawled. "I had something else in mind."

"Oh god," Tony said. "What?"

"Well, a Prince of Asgard has never married a Midgardian before," Loki said lightly. "Just imagine the scandal."

Tony immediately looked up at Loki’s face, pulling away enough to see him properly in the dim light. Loki’s hair was a mess, his cheeks were flushed, and his lips swollen. The wide, honest set to Loki’s eyes and the smile that threatened to break across his face made it clear that while the words might have been said jokingly, the inferred question was one hundred percent serious. Loki would not have said such a thing if he didn't mean it. It was unconventional, perhaps, but since when had they ever done anything the normal way? Tony’s heart was racing and there was a strange, choked feeling in his throat, but he wasn't nervous. He hardly had to pause before giving his answer— he'd decided long ago, after all.

“You know what?” Tony said, his lips curving into a smile of complete and utter happiness. “I think that’s your best plan yet.”

End.

Chapter End Notes

I actually can’t believe this is done. What am I meant to do with myself now? (If you want to prompt me, come say hi on Tumblr. I always love new ideas :P )

Special mention to whimsicalwombat, who, despite pretty much only knowing who Tony and Loki are through my ramblings, helped with many a crisis and had to repeat the words "no, it's not too dramatic" at least forty-seven times.

And thank you so so much to all you guys who have made it to the end of this monster, particularly everyone who enjoyed it enough to leave kudos, and especially all of you guys who have been commenting. I know I probably sound like a broken record, but honestly everything you’ve said means so much to me, and I can’t express how grateful I am. ♥
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!