Renew.

by IViv

Summary

Dread it. Run from it. Destiny still arrives.

Tony and Stephen spent the past four years preparing for the arrival of the Mad Titan. They both knew what it was like to have nothing. Now they had a team, a mentee, and each other.

But the more they had, the more they had to lose.
Preface

Chapter Notes

Edit: 15/06/2018

Welcome, new readers! As a continuation of Anew, this fic will remain mildly unfriendly toward the Ex-vengers. There won't be much screen time reserved for them. Please consider the tags very carefully before you proceed. Those who cannot stomach characters facing consequences for their actions need not read. Otherwise, enjoy the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This fic is the sequel to Anew. It is the second instalment of my slightly ambitious IronStrange MCU Overhaul.

As a time-travel do-over series, it is strongly recommended that you begin reading from the start of Anew. However, if you are impatient like me and would prefer to skip 130k+ worth of Tony's do-over and Stephen's origin story, you can jump straight into this one as both Anew and Renew can be read separately.

This fic will update on every Sunday, beginning from 10th June 2018.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter Notes

Remember the lovely 周小猫Nocturne from Lofter, who made a teaser trailer for Anew? They are back, and they’ve extended the teaser trailer into a clip! It features the first half of the story. I cannot imagine the effort 周小猫Nocturne must’ve put into creating this *amazing* clip.

Check it out: Anew Clip.

Beta’ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony woke to the scent of freshly laundered linen. His bare limbs were tangled in soft sheets. The room was quiet save for the sound of distant waves. Tony mumbled; something was shining in his face. He flipped to the side and snuggled up to the person next to him. His makeshift pillow chuckled.

“Good morning, Tony.” Tony was greeted by the bluest eyes he’d ever seen. He blinked away the remnants of sleep and saw that they were Stephen’s. His boyfriend of five years smiled. Late morning sun filtered through the translucent curtains, illuminating Stephen’s features in a soft glow. Tony closed his eyes and lifted his chin. Warm lips pressed against his own.

“Morning,” Tony hummed as they parted. Stephen planted one more kiss on the corner of Tony’s eyes. “Five minutes.” Tony rolled on top of Stephen. He nuzzled against Stephen’s chest and settled in a comfortable position. Stephen sighed and plucked a book from the nightstand. They stayed in bed until noon.

The Great Barrier Reef was stunning this time of the year. Stephen had wanted to visit, so Tony booked an island in the region for their customary mid-year holiday. There was nothing on the agenda other than food and rest, so the pair had a light lunch then geared up for some snorkelling in the afternoon.

The water was crystal clear. Schools of brightly coloured fish slipped past them as they swam along the shallow bay. Stephen dived to the reef floor to observe the blue, purple, and pink corals while Tony played with turtles. He named two of the shelled creatures Jim and Barbara. They were slow swimmers much like him.

The pair spent the evening chatting. They ate dinner by candlelight. After a few glasses of wine, Stephen suggested that they go for a walk. The two trod along the beach, guided by Stephen’s flashlight. Stephen had a destination in mind. With steady footsteps, he led Tony to a large, flat piece of rock by the sea then switched off the flashlight. Tony took a moment to adjust to the darkness.

The reef’s minimal light-pollution made it an ideal site to observe the night sky. Above them was a galaxy of stars. Millions of tiny specks formed a silver ribbon that traversed light-years beyond their birth planet. Meteoroids entered the Earth’s atmosphere, drawing trails of light across the sky.
“It’s beautiful,” Tony said, captured by the beauty of his home world.

“It is, look…” Stephen pointed upward. The tip of his finger overlapped with the brightest star. He curled his finger toward his palm and beckoned for the star to descend. Tony gasped as the twinkling light obeyed. The light source grew more radiant as it neared then fell into Stephen’s waiting hand.

Tony drew in a sharp breath at the shape of the object. It was a ring, with the star being the single diamond that was set onto the band. There was a row of inscription etched on the inside.

*To the love of my life, T.S.*

Tony’s mind was blank when Stephen took a step back and got down on one knee.

“Tony…” Stephen began, “you reached out to me when I was at my lowest. You stood by my side through thick and thin. I never knew the meaning of companionship until you helped me understand.” Stephen held up the glowing ring. “You are kind, passionate, and brave…words pale in comparison to how wonderful you are. What you do every day inspires me to be a better man.” Stephen’s breath hitched. The air was still for a heartbeat. “You are the love of my life. I’d like to spend the rest of my days with you, and I know in my heart that there can be no other… *Will you marry me?*

A galaxy of stars glimmered above them, separated by time and space, but the brightest one was within Tony’s reach. “Yes.” Tony had known the answer for years. No one understood him more than the man kneeling before him. Companionship went both ways; he’d been trapped on a lonesome path until Stephen found him. “Now put that thing on me and kiss me.”

Stephen let out a sigh of relief. He righted himself, and with shaking hands, he slipped the ring onto Tony’s finger. It fit perfectly. Tony pulled his fiancé close. Their lips met. Tony traced the outline of Stephen’s goatee with his free hand while his other was entwined with Stephen’s. The ring pressed against flesh that no other trinket had touched. Their breath mingled under the starlight.

The pair parted with reddened lips. “I was beginning to think I had to do it myself,” Tony said.

“I’ve been waiting for the perfect moment. One of us needs to be responsible,” Stephen quipped.

“Been practising that speech in front of the mirror?”

“Every night while I showered.”

“What about the nights I joined you?”

“Hmm…alright, maybe not every night.” Tony let out a little snort, which infected Stephen, and the two of them broke into laughter as waves collided against the rocks beneath their feet. After the jittery feeling settled, Stephen fished out his Sling Ring from his back pocket. An orange portal appeared with a swing of his arm. On the other side of the threshold was their suite in the resort.

“Stephan Strange,” Tony marvelled, “clearly you’ve thought this through.”

Stephen couldn’t hide the grin on his face. He gestured to the other side. “After you.” Tony rolled his eyes. He grabbed a fistful of Stephen’s shirt and pushed him onto their bed. Buttons gave way to Tony’s impatient hands. The portal closed as Stephen’s shirt landed on the floor.
Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Morning, May 24th, 2016 – Stark Tower

Tony stuck his tongue into the bright pink ice-cream. He licked upward and found a chunk of marshmallow. Unable to suppress his excitement, he pulled the chunk out with his teeth and chewed on the fluffy goodness. Tony hummed in contentment. He was on his second scoop and it tasted just as good as his first.

Stephen sat opposite him with a mug of steaming coffee and an empty ice-cream cup. The tiny, green, white, and blue container was a pathetic sight to behold. No one got a single scoop of ice-cream at Ben and Jerry’s, let alone in a cup. Tony bit into the crunchy cone and chewed loudly. Stephen looked up from his Stark pad, mug in hand. Tony caught a glimpse of the article he’s been reading. Awesome Facial Hair Husbands Break The Internet With News Of Engagement.

“I thought you swore off dairy,” Stephen said.

“Yeah, but then Ben and Jerry’s named a flavour after me,” Tony said through a mouthful of mush.

“Stark Raving Hazelnuts.” Stephen let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Not bad.”

“Bit chalky.”

“Said the one who ordered it…” Tony pointed at the empty cup with his spatula. The tell-tale brown residue was beginning to melt. “…multiple times.”

“You shouldn’t encourage them.” Stephen sat his mug down on the coaster. The weather was lovely with still winds, so the pair had decided to eat outside. They were seated on the decommissioned landing strip. Tony had been craving ice-cream since they returned from Australia. Stephen gave into his nagging and ran the errand while Tony was getting ready.

“You love it. Mr. ‘Strange Day on the Rocky Road’.” Tony licked the bright pink sphere again, flashing too much tongue. “I’m still bummed my flavour isn’t coffee. It would’ve been great.”

“Like Stark Awake?”

“More like Stark All-nighter: a tub is all you need to go all night.”

Stephen arched a well-groomed eyebrow. “Or Stark 11.00 p.m. because that's the time you should be in bed.”

Tony’s poker face cracked at those words. “Never change, Stephanie.”
A corner of Stephen’s lips curled up. He returned his attention to his Stark pad. Tony peered at Stephen from behind the cone. Stephen was dressed semi-formally today. The Master of the Mystic Arts wore a thin maroon turtleneck under a dark grey suit. He styled his hair back; the two streaks of silver ran perpendicular to his sharp cheekbones. His pocket square matched his watch and leather oxfords.

Despite what some might think, Stephen rarely wore formal attire. He preferred smart-casual unless it was for an occasion. Tony cleared his throat. He had to remind himself that twenty minutes before a scheduled seminar was a bad time for a boner. He’d have skipped the seminar if it wasn’t pre-game for Stark Expo 2016.

Six years had passed since the previous Stark Expo. Both Tony and Pepper had thought it was a good idea to revive the tradition. Unlike the rushed event from last time, Stark Expo 2016 has been under diligent planning for eighteen months. Tony crossed his legs and finished the remainder of his ice-cream. Pepper would throttle him if he botched the seminar in favour of screwing his fiancé. Not only would he be buried in paperwork for the foreseeable future, he’d lose his honeymoon privileges too.

“Where are you off too?” Tony asked as he wiped his mouth clean.

“To the seminar, with you,” Stephen said.

“Why would you do that? It’ll be a bore.”

“You will be wearing that ring today…” Stephen closed the cover of his Stark pad. He rounded the breakfast table and lifted Tony’s left hand. Stephen ran his thumb over the still twinkling stone. “I need to be there to remind the world who gave it to you.”

It wasn’t fair. Stephen could still make Tony’s heartbeat skip after all these years. Tony stole a kiss while Stephen was loading the dishwasher. The pair journeyed to the conference centre together.

The seminar was a strict invitee only event, but since it had been confirmed that Iron Man would be present, a group of fans still gathered outside the gates. Tony and Stephen made quick work of signing autographs for the group. They indulged their fans where they could. Public good-will was a soft but deadly weapon. Taking the type of work they did into consideration, they needed to utilise every tool at their disposal.

The Avengers had grown over the years. Rhodey took official command over the Iron Legion and was running search and rescue missions over the globe. His position in the Air Force saw him participate in combat missions too, but to respect Tony’s wishes, the Iron Patriot flew those alone.

Bruce returned regularly to catch-up with Tony and Stephen. Those sessions always ended with the three of them tinkering in the lab. He took up Stephen’s advice and began conversing with his alter ego. So far, his attempts had yielded little results, but none of them ended disastrously, which Bruce took as a good sign.

Thor and Loki hadn’t shown up in a while; the Asgardians were busy traversing the Nine Realms. They warned civilisations of the impending threat. Asgard has strengthened its army. Led by Odin, they would be a powerful ally in the war to come. Though for unknown reasons, Thor had appeared troubled the last time he visited. He asked Tony if he had experienced other visions, to which Tony replied no.

The world periodically caught snippets of Clint and Natasha’s work. Fury contacted Tony only when he wanted something, which was fine by Tony because he did the same. Bucky and Steve’s
The anti-Hydra co-op grew in numbers too. They had distanced themselves from S.H.I.E.L.D., but still accepted intel from them.

Despite Tony’s very public and very open invitation, the Avengers hadn’t grown exponentially like Tony would’ve hoped. Their logistics division bloomed overnight, but in terms of much needed heroes, they ended with a similar roster as last time. In hindsight, it made sense because superhumans were rare, and those alone were unlikely to come out of hiding unless there was an imminent threat. Of the handful of new recruits, Steve had met Sam Wilson on the same morning jog. Despite changed circumstances, Steve nonetheless managed to convince Sam that the Avengers needed him. Sam signed on as a consultant to avoid long-term commitment, but it was better than nothing.

Tony had no such luck on his side. Due to the Avenger Compound’s publicity in this timeline, Scott Lang never broke into his facility. Hank Pym found the parts he needed elsewhere and Antman never met the Falcon. Tony waited patiently until it became apparent that their paths would not collide. He spoke with Lang, which led to a discussion with Pym. Tony had been certain Pym would never let his technology be a part of the Avengers: an organisation bankrolled by a Stark. Therefore, Tony offered him obligation free consultantship status from the get-go, which Pym still refused. Infuriated by Pym’s inability to see the bigger picture, Tony unleashed his inner sarcasm behemoth. He might’ve added insult to injury. They were not on speaking terms.

However, Tony did manage to recruit someone he hadn’t asked for. Thinking about the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man alone, made Tony rub his temples in woe. Bringing Spider-Man to Leipzig had been his last resort to salvage the fractured team. He hadn’t thought the fight would escalate, which proved once again that he knew Steve about as much as Steve knew him. This time around there was no Avengers Civil War, and Tony had been content to let Peter hero along in the backdrop, rescuing cats from high places and busting small-time crooks…until Tony remembered something from the back of his head.

In his brief discussion with May Parker, she had told him about Peter’s strange behaviour since his uncle passed away. Tony, of course, knew that was due to Peter’s work as Spider-Man, but it got him thinking. He’d never intended to expose Peter to danger, and though there was nothing he could do about the past, he could make the present better. As far as he knew, Benjamin Parker was shot by an armed robber sometime before Civil War. Tony bribed Stephen with kinky armour sex, and the keeper of time found the exact date of which Peter’s uncle would be killed.

On the day of the robbery, Iron Man planted himself firmly between Peter’s uncle and the armed robber. Bullets bounced off Tony’s suit and he apprehended the robber singlehandedly. Peter watched from the sidelines awestruck. Tony never knew literal stars could pop out of someone’s eyes. The shaken Ben invited Tony over for dinner, where Tony reacquainted with May and Peter in this universe.

Satisfied that the deed was done, Tony was going to leave Peter alone, but nothing was ever simple. Peter revealed his powers to Tony and asked to join the Avengers. Tony responded with a quick and firm no then fled from the house. Peter proceeded to camp out at Stark Tower for a month.

As videos of Spider-Man began to surface on YouTube, it had been Stephen who prevented Tony from ripping his hair out. Stephen asked Tony if he would rather Peter be stupid on his own, or be stupid with Tony there to watch over him. Tony recognised his own words from the day he injected the Super Soldier Serum. With a sigh, he acknowledged Stephen’s witty comeback and took Peter under his wing.
Having signed the last autograph, Tony and Stephen agreed to a group photo. Their fans congratulated them on their engagement. They thanked the crowd and went on their way.

True to his word, Stephen stayed by Tony’s side all morning. He sat through three sessions of Tony explaining the same concept and followed Tony wherever he went. Tony would’ve been delighted, but he knew Stephen wasn’t the clingy type. Something was off. Stephen tried to hide it, but his shoulders were tense, and his eyes alert for trouble. Tony had Jarvis scan the premises. They found no anomalies.

Tony approached Stephen after lunch. He ran his hand down Stephen’s back and flinched at the coolness of metal. Stephen was wearing his battle robes. The suit was a glamour. “What’s the matter?” Tony gestured to Stephen’s hidden outfit. “You could be on a mission right now.”

Stephen looked around them. “It’s nothing. This is the last session?”

“Yeah,” Tony said absently. Stephen knew his schedule, which meant he must’ve gone through Tony’s calendar. That added another layer of mystery. Despite having synced both of their calendars with Jarvis and Friday, Stephen valued Tony’s privacy. He rarely bypassed Tony to view his schedule directly. “You’ve been acting weird since we left home. Should I bust out the suit?”

“No.”

The answer was too clipped to be true. Tony sighed. When Stephen didn’t want to reveal something, no one could beat it out of him, even with a stick. “Fine. I’m going to the washroom.” Tony turned on his heels.

“Me too.” Stephen was quick to follow. Tony stopped in his tracks.

“Alright, now you have me worried.” Tony took in their surroundings. They were in the hallway and by passers were loitering near them. Everyone in the facility knew who they were. If they didn’t want to cause a scene, they needed to solve this issue quickly.

“You don’t remember, do you,” Stephen said. It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

“Remember what?”

“May 24th, 2016.” Stephen lowered his voice as if his words would disturb a fragile balance.

“Crap, is today our anniversary?”

Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, Tony. Today was the day you died.”

Tony opened his mouth, when no words came out, he snapped it shut. He’d indeed forgotten. Or should he say, he never paid attention to begin with.

“Are you done here?” Stephen asked.

“I could be,” Tony said after he found his voice again.

Stephen led Tony into an empty room then opened a portal to the New York Sanctum. As Tony crossed the threshold, he was blindsided by a screen of red. The Cloak of Levitation flew to Tony at peak speed then swung around and settled on his shoulders. Its propped-up collar looked prepared for trouble.

“You’re in on this too?” Tony asked the cloak.
Stephen dropped the glamour he had been sustaining. Navy sorcerer robes replaced the grey cashmere suit. Custom built by Tony, the robe’s bulletproof weave reflected a metallic sheen. Stephen’s external HUD flickered to life. Friday greeted them as Stephen skimmed through the statistics. Satisfied that nothing was out of the ordinary, Stephen closed the hologram with a tap on his earpiece.

“You are over thinking this,” Tony said. “We are safe…for now. We haven’t seen or heard from Rogers in over six months, and Thanos isn’t coming for another two years—”

“Two years isn’t a long time,” Stephen interrupted. “Coincidentally, it is short enough that I began ‘timeline hopping’, as you so eloquently put it.” Stephen opened his hand. The Eye of Agamotto appeared with a flash of green light. He had been storing the Eye in another dimension. Since they knew a powerful cosmic Warlord was after the Time Stone, keeping it in Kamar-Taj, a temple full of trainees, was asking for trouble. “I went forward in time, to view alternate futures. To see all the possible outcomes of the coming conflict.”

“But the number of possibilities expand exponentially the further the event is away,” Tony said. “You stopped last year because there were trillions to view.”

“As this day approached, I had to do something. It didn’t feel right to sit idly by. I began anew, but this time methodically. Time travels in a linear line. Its hierarchical nature is similar to the structure of a tree. I viewed every hundredth future, the main branches, so to speak…” Stephen’s words came to a halt.

“How many did we win?”

“Of the fifty million four hundred and seven possibilities I’ve gone through as of last night: none.”

Goosebumps formed on the back of Tony’s neck. “None?”

“Not a single one.” Stephen shook his head. Dreadful silence filled the sanctum.

“I thought the worst we could do was one out of fourteen million,” Tony began. “What are we doing wrong?”

“I don’t know. As the stone wielder, I can only see events concerning myself. In the grand scheme of things, that limits the total number of futures to a hair’s breadth. I will do another pass tonight and see an alternative fifty million, but the chances of success are slim.”

Tony considered this. “Wait, you said ‘last night’, and then ‘tonight’.” Judging from the look on Stephen’s face, he knew he’d slipped up. “Have you been working through the night in astral projection again?” Stephen looked away, but Tony wasn’t going to let him off so easily. “Just because you’ve injected the serum doesn’t mean you’re invincible. Your mind needs rest too. This isn’t helping in the long run.”

“I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it.” Tony narrowed his eyes at Stephen’s words. Stephen let out a long breath. “The truth is…I can’t sleep. In the month leading up to this day, I kept revisiting Siberia in my dreams.” Tony’s heart sank. He knew the plague of nightmares all too well. “It doesn’t help how that thing’s back in your chest.” Stephen pointed at the faint, triangular glow beneath Tony’s dress shirt.

“I don’t need it to survive anymore. It houses the nanotech and a Starkium core, that’s it. It protects me…” Tony placed a comforting hand on Stephen’s shoulder, “…like you do.” Stephen’s features softened. He nodded silently. Inside the safety of the sanctum, they shared a rare moment
of peace. As the seconds ticked by, something began to feel off; a force was squishing them together. “You’re ruining the moment,” Tony said to the cloak. The cloak responded by snuggling the three of them closer.

“Let him be,” Stephen mumbled.

“You spoil him,” Tony said. Stephen’s response was muted by a thunderous crash. The parquet floors shook underneath them. An enlarged mandala appeared outside of the sanctum’s circular window.

In preparation for Thanos, Stephen had strengthened the sanctum’s defence mechanisms. Something powerful had triggered the runes. The pair parted. Mark Sixty seeped from the arc reactor and encased Tony in a web of nanoparticles. An outer shell of red and gold formed within seconds. The cloak returned to its master. Stephen’s external HUD flickered back on.

“Our satellites have detected a spike in cosmic energy,” Jarvis said. Tony exchanged looks with Stephen. They flew down to the entrance lobby. Tony’s left repulsor augmented into an arm cannon. He opened the front door, prepared for an attack, but what he saw took him aback.


“That’ll teach you to knock next time.” Tony’s mouth ran on auto-pilot. He retracted his helmet as Thor wrapped him in a crushing hug. Tony was thankful for the nanoparticles that encased him.


“I bring news from Asgard. Tony, the All-Father has summoned you.”

Chapter End Notes

So it begins! Thank you to everyone who has commented on this fic before it even started. Let's take the boys on one more adventure. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
It was safe to say that up until this point, Tony has never experienced interstellar travel. He cheered as he coursed through the stars with Stephen and Thor, guided by a tunnel of energy. Dust, hydrogen, helium, and other types of ionised gas formed vibrant nebulas which the Bifrost punctured. As they approached their destination, Tony caught a fleeting aerial view of the Asgardian’s home world.

Asgard was a floating piece of terrain the size of a continent. At the centre was a triangular-shaped palace sculpted from pillars of gold. Flanked by mountain ranges, the city was built on a riverine plain. Curiously, if one ignored the mountains, the entirety of Asgard was flat. The sea expanded outward until it reached the end of the terrain and fell into the waiting void. Tony wondered whether Asgard had a renewable water supply. The Flat Earth Society would feel right at home here.

The Bifrost spat them into a domed room. The trio came to a halt before a man with orange eyes. “Friends, this is Heimdall, Gatekeeper of Asgard, Guardian of the Bifrost Bridge, and Watcher of Worlds,” Thor introduced. “Heimdall, Tony and Stephen, as you well know.” He clapped his friends on the shoulder.

“The All-Father expects you. I have sent word of your arrival. Welcome to Asgard,” Heimdall said.

“Happy to be here,” Tony said.

As it was Tony and Stephen’s first time visiting, the group took the scenic route to the palace. Asgard was beautiful. The streets were wide and shaded by lush foliage. Asgardian architecture favoured the use of metals and pale stones. The materials bathed the city in a golden light. The trio flew down the Rainbow Bridge and stopped by important historical buildings. Tony made a mental note to visit their engineering division later.

They landed on a balcony inside the palace. “I’m afraid this is where we must part ways. Father has summoned Tony alone,” Thor said to Stephen, who narrowed his eyes.

“There is a threat on Tony’s life,” Stephen said.

“I can protect myself.” Tony folded his arms and looked at Stephen pointedly.

“I swear on my honour that no harm will befall Tony on these lands,” Thor said.

Stephen drew in a subtle breath, ready to press further, but Tony shook his head. Stephen squared his jaw at Tony’s disapproval. “Very well,” Stephen said. He cleared his throat and the Cloak of Levitation left his shoulders. The sentient relic hovered to Tony and settled on top of Mark Sixty. Combined with the sleek lines of nanotechnology, Tony’s new look blended with Asgardian
fashion surprisingly well.

“I won’t be long.” Tony knew this was Stephen’s middle ground, so he accepted the offer.

“I’ll wait here,” Stephen said.

“There’s no need for formality. Save for a few vaults, you may visit anywhere you wish,” Thor said. He and Tony made way for a set of heavy gates. “Oh—I almost forgot. My brother asks for you. See him, if you’ve a mind,” Thor added as the gates closed behind them.

Tony squashed the uneasy feeling when his visual connection to Stephen was severed. The cloak fluttered behind him. Suddenly Tony was thankful for Stephen’s gesture of reassurance. “So, how’re things?” Tony asked the burly demigod. Thor hadn’t aged a day since he first journeyed to Earth. Two thin braids extended from his temples to the back of his head, holding the golden locks in place. He appeared healthy, but illness did not plague their kind. A shadow of worry loomed over his features. It was ever present, even as he smiled.

“Asgard fares well…” Thor replied.

“I’m sensing ‘a but…”’

Thor slowed his footsteps. He gazed out of the palace window. Their vantage point offered them a magnificent view of the city. “…but I fear for the future of this realm. When we fought Malekith in the depth of Svartalfheim, I came into brief contact with the Aether.” Tony slowed too. Following the Convergence and the attack on the palace, the Asgardians had left the Reality Stone with the Collector of Knowhere. It was unwise for Asgard to keep half of the six stones. Tony thought it was a risky move, but they had no better alternatives. “Since then, I’ve been getting these… visions.” Thor furrowed his brows.

Tony’s head snapped up at the word. “Visions? About what?”

“Ragnarok...The Doom of the Gods.”

Tony ran a hand over his face. Maybe May 24th, 2016 just wasn’t his day. First Stephen told him they were destined to fail no matter what, now this? “You gotta be clearer than that. Give me the run down.”

“It began after the Aether was secure. The vision was brief, intangible, and the first of many. I couldn’t decipher its meaning, so I visited the Norn Cave in search of clues. The Norns can see what no eye can, what is and what’s to come. I bathed in the Water of Sights. The water spirits returned me to my dreams so I could see with clarity. What I gathered troubles me till this very day.”

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all,” Tony said.

Thor turned to Tony. “Know this, it matters not what we do, the Infinity Stones will gather atop a gauntlet of gold. The universe will quiver before its power.”

Tony bit his bottom lip. The Infinity Stones must be kept apart at all cost. Not one being was meant to wield all that power. There were two ways to protect something, lock it away in an impregnable vault, or hide it somewhere no one could find it. Vault-wise, Asgard was the best option they had, and location-wise, Tony and Stephen had searched far and wide for a place to hide the stones. Most of which had been wasted effort, hence why Stephen still stored the Eye of Agamotto in a pocket dimension only he could access.
Tony clenched his teeth. They’d come too far for this to be the end. There must be something they had missed. “We’ll find a way. Like we always do,” Tony said after a pause.

“That we will,” Thor grinned. “We have tempted fate before; this shall be no different. Come, we shouldn’t keep father waiting.”

The pair journeyed down the paved corridor. Guards bowed in their presence. Despite his troubles, Thor greeted each of them with a smile. Tony’s mood lightened too. Over the years, he had witnessed Thor’s brashness slowly chip away. Thor might’ve once made a terrible king, but he’d learned from his mistakes and cleaned up his act. His people had faith in him. He’d make a fine successor to the throne.

Thor led them to a private courtyard. A stocky Aesir stood with his back to them. He turned, and at last Tony came face to face with the Protector of the Nine Realms. “Father, this is Anthony, son of Stark, Man of Iron, and Protector of Earth. He is the leader of the Avengers: Earth’s Mightiest Heroes,” Thor said proudly.

Tony supposed he should’ve gone over the process with Thor. He’d met royals before, but Earth no longer took monarchy seriously. How was he supposed to greet Odin, the literal God of Gods? “Hi,” Tony forced out. He added a lame little wave.

“You’ve journeyed here in one piece,” Odin said.

“Yeah, the Bifrost was great. Terrible for lawn maintenance, but efficient.” Tony’s mouth ran off on a tangent.

“Leave us,” the King of Asgard said to his eldest. Thor winked at Tony and left without a second glance. Tony held out his hand after Thor. Did Thor just leave him here? What was he supposed to do? From what he had heard, Odin wasn’t exactly an easy-going guy.

“Walk with me, child,” Odin beckoned. Tony followed his lead, mindfully remaining half a step behind the All-Father. “Thor has regaled me with tales of the Avengers. He speaks highly of you.”

“We’ve gone on a few day trips,” Tony quipped.

“Aye. It is you who warned Thor of Malekith. My family owes you a great debt.”

“We’ve gone on a few day trips,” Tony quipped.

“Aye. It is you who warned Thor of Malekith. My family owes you a great debt.”

“Glad I could help.”

They exchanged pleasantries. Tony’s squared shoulders relaxed as they talked. So far, so good. Odin was taking his time to reveal why he had summoned Tony to Asgard, but Tony didn’t mind the delay. He was familiar with this, two strangers sizing each other up not out of spite, but curiosity.

“Frigga sends her thanks. Not only for warning Asgard of the Dark Elves, but for helping us show our son the error of his ways.” Odin paced through the palace. He hadn’t specified which son or what error, but Tony knew there was only one candidate up for derogation.

“I wouldn’t say error, considering how he was brain washed by the enemy.”

“You know not the extent of his treachery.”

Tony rolled his eyes where Odin couldn’t see him. He had a string of cutting retorts lined up, but for the sake of diplomacy he swallowed them back down. They continued to talk, but this time about cosmic threats.
Having had time to study the All-Father, Tony couldn’t help but feel a sliver of disappointment. Odin Borson was dignified, poised, but his demeanour was not entirely befitting of the God of Gods. Odin kept a full beard and wore his hair in a braid like Thor. He was dressed in plain robes; no cape, no helmet, and no armour. The thin fabric revealed his shrivelled frame, and his eye patch drew attention to his single, downturned eye. Tony wasn’t sure what he’d expected, perhaps someone almost identical to Thor, but older and wiser. Though one thing was for certain, after hearing about Odin’s majesty from Thor, and reading about his splendour from Norse mythology, Tony had expected…

“You wonder why I’ve summoned you,” Odin said after a stretch of silence.

“Yeah, but don’t get me wrong, there doesn’t have to be a reason. I’ll happily play tourist,” Tony said.

“It’s not so simple.” Odin’s footsteps slowed before a set of ornamented gates. Two guards pushed them open then kneeled before their king. Odin strolled inside. Pillars of gold supported a vast expanse of mural ceiling. Tony marvelled at the moving images above him. The most prominent piece was circular, showing Asgard in its full glory. The Rainbow Bridge stretched for miles to meet the palace in the distance. The outer ring was divided into six even slices. They showed the Royal Family and peace within the Nine Realms. Odin stopped at the foot of a flight of steps. Above it were two guardian beasts, and above that: a seat.

The throne of Asgard.

“Your species once thought Asgardian’s were gods…but we are not gods. We are born, we live; we die, just as humans do.” Despite his upward gaze, Odin made no attempt to climb those steps. “You are not the first human I’ve met. There was another before you, a woman.”

“Jane Foster,” Tony said, “brilliant astrophysicist.”

“She once stood where you stand now. Thor had brought her to me. He was proud to call her his, but I did not share his sentiment. She was unfit to be queen. Thor could leave for a voyage across the realms and return to her crumbling bones. Mortals have so little time.”

“But that’s not why you’ve called me here.” Tony took in the radiance of the throne. Having been born as the sole heir of his father’s technological empire, Tony saw not glory, but crushing responsibility.

“No.” Odin looked Tony in the eye. “I once banished Thor from this kingdom, called him vain, greedy, arrogant…but perhaps I am no better, and I no longer have the excuse of youth. There is a resiliency to mortals. Your will is strong.” Odin looked to the mural above their heads. Ribbons of gold illuminated the benevolent features of the painted Asgardians. Tony caught a whiff of the blooming flowers, charmed to diffuse a real scent. “Time hides, and time reveals. Its value lay not in how much one has, but in what one does with it.” Odin’s words carried an air of finality. Tony had a bad feeling about this.

“Anthony, son of Stark. I have summoned you because my time is near. I must pass on what I can no longer carry. Two Infinity Stones reside inside my vault. They cannot fall into the wrong hands, too much hangs in the balance. I will return the sceptre to you, its rightful guardian.”

“I—I’m sorry?” Tony stammered at the turn of events. “This is not a store refund. They don’t take up much space. Geeze, I sound like a pushy salesman, but you’ve held onto them for all these years, why part with them now?” Trepidation squeezed the air from Tony’s lungs. He recalled what had happened in his past life. “I shouldn’t be left alone with an Infinity Stone. And more
importantly why me? Why the sceptre? I’m just a man in a can. There’s got to be someone else you can trust. I can’t even lift Thor’s hammer.”

“No, you can’t lift Mjolnir, but worthiness is not measured by a hammer. I gifted Mjolnir to my son to help him control his power. It is not the source of his strength.” Odin sat at the foot of the throne and beckoned Tony to do the same. “I have asked Heimdall to watch you since you first joined forces with my sons. You have proven your worthiness not through words but deeds. I ask you not as king, nor a god, but as an Aesir past his prime.” Time has marred the All-Father’s face with crinkles and folds. His sagging skin trembled as he spoke.

“I’ve spent millennia as the ruler of Asgard. My connection to this realm is strong. I know what these lands know. The lands mourn a great-loss soon to come. It is among us: Ragnarok. As king I must fight one last battle, but if Asgard should fall… I cannot wield two stones at once. The sceptre is of no use to me in the coming battle. Take it and return to Earth. Stay vigilant. Where I have failed, you must not.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys. So life currently has me in a chokehold, but the good news is I have a clear direction of where I want to take this series. I have all the events lined up in chronological order, I just have to write them.

Due to the unforeseeable events, I'll update twice within the next three weeks. You guys can expect an update on the 27th of June, and another one on the 8th of July. I hope to return to my normal schedule after that. Fingers crossed.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stephen followed a servant through the network of elevated walkways. The weather was lovely, and a sweet scent permeated the city. The blooming plants added pops of vibrant colour to an otherwise austere palette. The servant halted before a circular building. The first object that greeted Stephen was a golden statue at least twenty feet tall. The figure held out his arms as if basking in his own magnificence. Stephen squinted; the statue reflected the afternoon sun into his eyes. It clashed with the surrounding architecture and butchered the tasteful streetscape. A horned helmet exposed the identity of the culprit.

Stephen sighed and bid the servant farewell. The building was in use; a collective gasp sounded from within, followed by clanging metal noises. Stephen entered through the main gate. The building’s interior reminded him of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. Two stories of wooden benches circled an open-air stage. In the groundling’s section in front of the stage was an upholstered daybed. The Aesir lounging on top had his back to the door. Flowing black curls draped over the daybed’s backrest.

The theatre was packed with Asgardians. They eyed Stephen with scorn as he pushed through the crowd. On the stage, a group of actors stood amidst golden sand dunes. In front of them was a silver cylinder clasping a brilliant blue cube. A beam of light projected upwards. The centre of the ceiling was charmed dark blue to mimic a portal to space. Asgardians wearing alien masks clashed with what Stephen assumed were the Avengers. Their costumes appeared as if they had been sewn by someone who knew vaguely what they looked like, but had never actually met any of them in real life.

“Oh, Loki, son of Odin, mighty God of Mischief, there’s too many of them!” an Aesir donning red and gold armour yelled. He lifted his faceplate, revealing a stuck-on goatee. Stephen had a feeling this was going to be a long show.

“Man of Iron, we must seal the breach!” another Aesir wearing a horned helmet replied. He clutched a sceptre in his right hand and his hair was limp with product.

“Aye!” ‘Tony’ confirmed. An actor clad in yellow, presumably to blend in with the sands, entered the stage. She held up a yellow stick with a black pointy object stuck to the end. “But not before we deliver the nuclear bomb! The nuclear bomb holds Midgardian fire magic; it will ignite those blasted Chitauri!” The yellow-clad actor advanced toward the centre of the stage. She lifted and lowered the stick; the warhead bobbed up and down. “Here it comes!” ‘Tony’ gestured to the warhead. “Loki, will you risk your life to save Midgard?”

“It is my duty.” ‘Loki’ said solemnly. He exchanged nods with ‘Tony’. ‘Rogers’ and ‘Barnes’, who had been fighting Chitauri in the background paused their fight to hook a cable onto either side of ‘Tony’. After the cable was secured, ‘Tony’ was lifted into the air. The warhead flew into his waiting arms. He carried the warhead upward and disappeared into a trap door. ‘Loki’ marched
toward the portal device. The charmed Tesseract lookalike emitted a blinding glow, knocking ‘Loki’ to the ground.


“Somebody, help!” ‘Barton’ yelled. He sprinted off the stage and out of the side gate.

“No, it’s alright,” ‘Loki’ said. He righted himself with ‘Stephen’s’ help and approached the device again. Repelled by an invisible force, ‘Loki’ let out a lengthy cry as he inched closer to the light source. His features were stern with determination. The tip of his sceptre touched the Tesseract lookalike and every actor on stage yelled collectively. The audience gasped. Stephen contemplated fast-forwarding time.

Grey smoke filled the set. The actors shouted each other’s names. When the air cleared, ‘Tony’ was lying on the centre of the stage. “Man of Iron!” ‘Loki’ ran toward him, followed by the remaining Avengers. He came to a crashing halt beside ‘Tony’ and took in his motionless form. “Noooooo!” ‘Loki’ cried. Stephen narrowed his eyes at his dispassionate counterpart on stage.

‘Tony’ opened his eyes. His surprised yelp was mirrored by the audience. “I’m back…” ‘Tony’ murmured. He looked at ‘Loki’, and then at ‘Stephen’. “Midgard is safe.”

“Aye. You are back, and our home world is secure.” ‘Stephen’ fell to his knees beside ‘Tony’ too. The two shared a passionate kiss. A unified ‘aww’ echoed through the audience.

“And so, with the help of the Avengers, Loki ended the invasion. He fought back those disgusting Chitauri and brought peace to Midgard…” ‘Thor’ narrated. He circled to the front of the group and gestured to ‘Loki’. “Brother, ‘twas many moons ago father found you on that frostbitten battlefield. On that day, we did not yet see in you, Midgard’s saviour. No. You were merely a little blue baby icicle…that melted our foolish hearts.”

The theatre burst into applause. The Aesir on the daybed rose from his seat. “Bravo! Bravo!” He clapped and surveyed the crowd’s reaction with a satisfied smirk. His smirk froze when he caught Stephen’s unimpressed look. Stephen waited for the crowd to clear before approaching the Aesir.

“If you sought authenticity, in Shakespeare’s time, you’d be sitting up there.” Stephen pointed at the royal booths above the stage.

“Nonsense, this location offers the best view,” Loki, the real one, said as he crooked his head to the side.

“I see you’re well.” Stephen’s gaze flicked to the wine and grapes placed within arm’s reach of the daybed.

“Unmaimed, yes,” Loki said nonchalantly. He waved his hand at the waiting servants and they cleared Loki’s furniture from the theatre. “Thor was inspired by Midgardian law, a practice named ‘parole’, I believe.”

Stephen snickered. “You? Good behaviour?”

“I do my part.” Loki folded his arms. “I’ve devoted my time to ensure the people of Asgard are sufficiently entertained. For my work, mother had rewarded me with a title.”

“Lord of Community Theatre?”
“Ambassador of the Arts.”

The pair regarded each other in silence, then promptly broke into laughter. “It’s good to see you.” Stephen clapped Loki on the shoulder.

Loki didn’t echo Stephen’s sentiment with words, but the corner of his lips curled up too. “Come, let us speak elsewhere. I want to show you something.”

Stephen followed Loki’s lead. As the pair strolled through the city, they exchanged findings from recent reads. Loki had been inspired by the notion of combining ice magic with lightning magic, whereas Stephen questioned the theory’s practicality. Stephen argued that ice was a poor conductor of electricity; the ions responsible for transmitting current became immobile after the water was frozen, but Loki insisted that magic transformed the elements, because how else would Thor slay Jotun mounts that were made of ice?

They debated intensely, each holding onto their own beliefs while vying to convince the other. Stephen had missed these conversations. Loki’s mind was an archive filled with wonders. He was an adept user of magic, and his niche expertise on both Asgardian and Jotun spells were invaluable. To sweeten the deal, Loki even made a fine sparring partner. They had grown familiar with each other over those practice sessions. Conversation on topics outside of magic seemed like the next logical step.

Considering that they so rarely saw each other, Stephen hadn’t meant to let his gloomy mood distract him, but with what could happen clouding his mind, it was difficult to focus on the discussion. Loki picked up the hints. “Something the matter?”

“No,” Stephen said. Loki side-eyed him with raised brows. Stephen stood his ground until it became apparent that Loki intended to know. “Alright…yes. I’m concerned about Tony’s meeting with the All-Father.” Stephen ran a hand over his face. Perhaps Tony was right. The nights he’d spent working in astral projection had taken a toll on him. His body was well-rested, but his mind struggled to word his thoughts into sentences.

“Why must you fret? The All-Father will not harm his guest,” Loki said.

Stephen sighed. Loki had a point, but history tended to repeat itself. He had been hesitant to leave Tony with those he trusted, let alone those he did not trust. To top everything off, Tony was prone to accidents. Stephen had stayed by Tony’s side all morning for that very reason. He even tripled the ward on the sanctum in case there had been a threat he couldn’t handle. The All-Father’s summon had rendered his efforts moot. He couldn’t portal to another realm. Therefore, despite knowing Odin would never maim a friend of the crown prince, Stephen still questioned his intentions.

“Oh, cease your inane brooding. You’re reminding me of Thor.” Loki rolled his eyes. Stephen turned to face Loki, who explained Thor’s recent behaviour. “Prophecies are fulfilled by beings. There are no higher powers governing the universe. Behind every action, there is a source. Make of that what you will.”

“But what if there’s no way to beat the source?” Stephen asked. “What if we are destined to fail?”

“Then we minimize the damage and accept defeat with grace,” Loki shrugged, “but no one can claim to know destiny, not even the keeper of time.” Green light lit up Loki’s hand. A projection of the Eye of Agamotto came into view then disintegrated into pale shimmers. “A word of advice, I’ve seen too many waste away millennia, grieving over the what if. Anthony is the Man of Iron. There will always be a threat on his life.”
“Thanos is coming,” Stephen said.

“Aye. The Mad Titan nears, but even the immortal Titans can be killed, hence their near extinction.” For a while, the pair trod down the path in silence, each occupied by their own thoughts. When Loki spoke again, his words took a softer turn. “Speaking of Anthony, how goes your plans to wed him?”

“It’s…going,” Stephen forced out.

“And it’ll go for another decade, I suspect.”

“Where are you taking me?” Stephen changed the subject with the finesse of a tavern drunkard, but Loki let it slide. He held a smug smile and did not answer Stephen’s question until a sizable building came into view.

“The only place in Asgard worth visiting, of course.” Loki pushed open a set of ornate doors. Stephen’s eyes lit up at the sight that followed. He ambled into a towering rotunda topped with a glass dome. Lining the curved walls were shelves upon shelves of books. Six hallways extended to other sections of the megastructure. They stretched as far as the eye could see. “Welcome to the Royal Athenaeum of Asgard.” Loki sighed in contentment. He ran his hand down a modest stone column. “As a child, I spent a great many evenings here. Her breadth of knowledge is remarkable.”

“This is phenomenal,” Stephen marvelled as he took in the sheer quantity of volumes the rotunda alone contained. He peered down the hallway to his left. If every adjacent section were the same…

“May I read here?” It felt wrong to converse in a library. Stephen lowered his voice. He didn’t want to disturb other visitors, though the structure was surprisingly empty.

“Access to the athenaeum is restricted, but so are visits to Kamar-Taj, consider yourself recompensed.” Loki lifted his chin ever-so-slightly. The proud brat. Stephen nodded. “Now, I have other matters to attend to. I trust you’ll leave the place intact, unlike my rampaging baboon of a brother.”

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Stephen spent the remainder of the afternoon engrossed by the athenaeum’s collection. Reading was a fine distraction. Stephen hadn’t noticed the passing of time until a servant informed he was needed elsewhere. Tony waited for him at the entrance of the Rainbow Bridge. He was unharmed, and carried a familiar container embossed with the Stark Industries logo. Stephen’s heart settled back into his chest cavity.

“How goes the meeting?” Stephen asked as the cloak returned to him. Tony responded with a miffed tsk. He lifted the container into view. Stephen’s brows pulled together. “Tell me that’s not what I think it is.”

“It is, and it’s going straight into storage.” Tony fired up his repulsors but left his helmet open. “Let’s head back. I would’ve loved to stay for mead, but this puppy needs to be secure.”
“Odin just…gave it to you?” Stephen asked as they flew down the bridge. He eyed the container housing the Mind Stone. Mere hours ago, he’d seen a replica parading around in broad daylight. Now he was seeing the real deal. The sense of déjà vu was uncanny.

“Yup,” Tony chirped. His features were tense from false cheer. They did not speak again until they reached the end of the bridge. The two of them bid Heimdall farewell. The Watcher of Worlds inserted Hofund into the bridge mechanisms, and Stephen and Tony were engulfed by another beam of energy.

When Stephen opened his eyes again, he and Tony were standing on the footpath before the New York Sanctum. The fresh Bifrost seal sizzled on top of the old one. The overlapping patterns mirrored Stephen’s muddled mind. He transported them inside the sanctum with a swing of his arm. Tony dumped the container on the floor of the foyer. He paced in circles while Mark Sixty retracted inside the arc reactor. Having spent hours rubbing against armour; Tony’s once presentable suit was wrinkled beyond recognition.

“Great, now we have this too. We haven’t even figured out what to do with that.” Tony gestured to Stephen’s chest, where the Eye of Agamotto should be.

“There has to be a reason behind Odin’s change of mind, and what of the Tesseract?” Stephen asked.

“Both Thor and Odin had been going on about it, something called Ragnarok,” Tony threw his hands into the air. “Odin said he’ll hold on to the Tesseract…for now. He plans to use it in the future.”

“In Norse mythology, Ragnarok is a series of events, including a great battle which led to the deaths of many gods. If both King and first in line to the throne foresee it…” Stephen rubbed his chin. “Odin is giving the sceptre to you as a failsafe, in case Asgard perishes and the Royal Family falls.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. “In the futures you saw, were there any where Asgard won? And what causes Ragnarok anyway? For there to be a battle, there first must be an enemy. Thor believes he’s onto something. There is a being named Surtur, prophesised to be the one to start Ragnarok.”

Stephen shook his head. “I had to cover at least a fraction of the total number of futures. I saw each one briefly, minutes at most. I’d been focusing on the end game. I wanted to find the timeline where we succeeded first, and then revisit the milestones in detail. Had either Thor or Odin mentioned a timeframe for Ragnarok?”

“No, only that it was near.”

“Near for an Aesir could mean decades.”

The sanctum’s grandfather clock ticked steadily in the background. “What do you suggest?” Tony asked after a long pause.

“We carry on with our initial plan…at least for the time being. For the invasion, we know who the threat is, we know what he wants, and we know when he’ll arrive. I’ll keep an eye out for Ragnarok as I keep searching the timelines for a way to succeed.”

Tony pursed his lips. Stephen knew it was eating away at Tony: not being able to help his friends, but they had too little information to pursue, and they were stretched too thin as it was. Tony
nodded after he considered Stephen’s words. “There goes our afternoon. You know, following work, I was gonna take you out for dinner, plan our wedding,” Tony scoffed. He looked down at his suit and tried to smooth out the wrinkles.

Stephen checked his watch. It was getting late; takeout seemed to be their best option. “We could go tomorrow. Until we find a better place for it, I’ll keep the sceptre with the Eye.”

“That just paints a bigger target on the back of your head.”

“I can take care of myself.” Stephen stepped into Tony’s personal space. “Sounds familiar?”

“Cheeky bastard,” Tony gave Stephen’s shoulder a playful nudge.

Stephen steadied himself by circling an arm around Tony’s waist. “What do you say to chicken paella? That Spanish place off Fifth Avenue was good. We can still plan our wedding over dinner.”

“Wedding planning over takeout?” Tony grimaced. “How the mighty have fallen. Remember when we first started dating? It was suits, bowties, and Michelin restaurants.”

“They say marriage is the tomb of romance. Still want to marry me?”

Tony stood on his tiptoes and leaned in. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He planted a loud smooch on Stephen’s lips. “Jarvis, order the paella.”

“Already done, Sir,” Jarvis said from the sunglasses in Tony’s pocket.

“Great, now on to wedding planning. What do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking something small, classy but intimate. Like a vineyard in Italy.” Stephen banished the sceptre container into his pocket dimension. The pair journeyed deeper into the sanctum.

“Vineyard weddings are so 2008. Our wedding needs to be big, bold.” Tony swept his hand across an invisible horizon. “We’re gonna have hundreds of people over.”

“A tasteful venue of that size will be a nightmare to find.”

“As long as we know what we want, we can palm it off to my assistant.”

“Which defeats the purpose of planning our wedding, Tony.”

They continued to exchange snappy remarks until takeout arrived. The pair enjoyed their paella in relative peace. The remainder of the evening was uneventful. They returned to the penthouse via a permanent gateway Stephen had installed; a similar one connected Stark Tower to the Avengers Compound.

Due to their equally terrible sleeping schedules as of late, the pair went to bed at eleven sharp. Tony had been the first to fall asleep. Stephen made sure Tony’s bare shoulders were covered before settling in himself. He held onto Tony and listened to the man’s soft snores.

Stephen didn’t close his eyes until it was well past midnight.

Chapter End Notes
Here's the promised update. Thanks for being patient with me.

A few of you have asked over the past week, so I thought I should lay the plan out in the open. Unfortunately, this fic won't have a Black Panther arc or a Ragnarok arc. Ragnarok will happen off-screen, and it will trigger the main event, which is Infinity War, but Tony and Stephen won't be personally involved. I've done this so I have more time to explore other characters such as Spider-Man and the Guardians. (Supreme Family here I come!) This is also done for plot continuity. Anew had three main acts: Tony's initial resurrection, The Avengers, and Dr. Strange. Renew will feature two: Spider-Man: Homecoming, and the behemoth that is Infinity War. I hope this all makes sense. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
The remainder of June passed without a hitch. Tony and Stephen settled back into their old routine of running the Avengers, researching known enemies, and preparing for the second invasion. Tony was the Avengers’ overarching leader, but he and Stephen specialised in different sectors. Tony took care of logistics, public relations, and non-esoteric emergencies, whereas Stephen spearheaded the ‘Department of Extra-terrestrial and Interdimensional Threats’.

The D.E.I.T. was the largest and fastest growing department of the Avengers. Considering the coming battle, it was also the most important, hence why Stephen was placed in charge. Stark Industries, as a major shareholder of the U.S. Department of Damage Control, had exclusive access to off-world technology, alien tissue samples, and materials previously unknown to Earth. The D.E.I.T. attracted scientists from across the globe, but with increased capabilities came a demand for fees.

Despite having little to show for its efforts, the D.E.I.T. consumed most of the Avengers’ funds. Its appetite was impossible to sate. Before the Battle of Mojave Desert, humanity had thought they were alone in the universe. No one knew aliens existed, let alone studied them. Everything the D.E.I.T. had, they built from scratch. Tony, and Stark Industries by extension was the Avengers’ sole benefactor; even the largest tech conglomerate in the world needed to be mindful of where its money went.

The Avengers was a not-for-profit, peacekeeping organisation. It consumed funds at an alarming rate yet did not generate a dime in return. In Tony’s previous life, bankrolling the Avengers had been a breeze. None of them knew what they were doing. The Avengers had been a rag-tag band of misfits and outfitting a handful of superheroes sat comfortably within Tony’s capabilities. Now the Avengers were a corporation. They had labs opened with the sole purpose of decoding alien technology. Training facilities, research and development, fabrication of specialised equipment… protecting the world wasn’t cheap. Public good-will had increased Stark tech sales to an extent, but Iron Man had been a household name before the Avengers assembled.

Aside from keeping with tradition, Stark Expo 2016 had been a part of Tony and Pepper’s plan to increase revenue. It was a hidden agenda no one could’ve guessed. Stark Industries was lucrative to a fault, but the public could never comprehend how much work went behind saving the world.

Pepper was keeping the Avengers afloat as it was, but Tony needed more leeway. He had so many ideas he wanted to explore. Tony never gave up on building a suit of armour around the world, and with the impending threat of Thanos, that idea refused to go quietly into the night.

Earth was ridiculously outgunned in the galactic scene. Humanity needed some form of defence mechanism against extra-terrestrial threats. Ultron was meant to be that line of defence. Following the Battle of Sokovia, Ultron had been frozen indefinitely; the hundreds of hours poured into it turned to waste. The world blamed Iron Man for the lives that had been lost. Tony blamed himself.
too; he hadn’t started any major projects since. But now, six years after his resurrection, Tony had accumulated enough positive deeds to curb his self-doubt. He reassessed the information at hand, and together with Stephen and Bruce, the three of them concluded that the existing framework was too valuable to waste.

They reopened the project in spring. To ensure things stayed under control this time, Tony trimmed the project down to a fraction of what it once was, then tripled their failsafe measures. Tony had learned from his mistakes. If anything, Ultron 2.0 was going to underdo it. He would not aim too far, and he would not aim too high. Officially, the team dubbed Ultron 2.0 the ‘World Security Net’. It was met with heavy resistance on the political front, but Tony had anticipated backlash. They had two more years to gather momentum. It was something else that rang the alarm in Tony’s head.

Instead of prickling his senses, the return of the Mind Stone had stampeded over them. The cursed thing had stayed put in Asgard for four years, and yet months after they reopened Ultron, it decided to return to Earth? Tony refused to believe the two were isolated incidents; hence he’d been paying the Net extra attention as of late. They could not afford another mistake. The Mind Stone was secure in Stephen’s pocket Dimension. Theoretically, it should have no way of affecting the outside world, but things rarely went according to theory. Tony locked the Mind Stone container inside another safe just to be sure; then made Stephen promise not to poke the safe even with a ten-foot pole. So far, the Net was showing no anomalies outside standard developmental hiccups. Tony crossed his fingers it’d stay that way.

The beginning of July marked a special occasion: Wakanda was at long last ready to join the rest of humanity. Since the Battle of Sokovia never happened in this timeline, Zemo hadn’t felt entitled to bomb the Vienna International Centre. Not that anyone worth bombing was there to begin with; the Sokovia Accords hadn’t been drafted either. As the direct result of Zemo living happily with his family, King T’Chaka of Wakanda was alive and in excellent health. The mantle of the Black Panther had not yet been passed to his son.

Tony sipped on a cup of long black as he watched T’Challa reveal his country to the outside world. Flanked by a roll of Dora Milaje warriors, the prince spoke with a thick Wakandan accent. CIA operative Everett Ross sat on the same row as Tony. He took in the presentation with an oddly fond look.

According to the Avengers intel division, Ross had been spotted with the prince last month at a nightclub in Busan. Instead of going dancing, the pair had been trading blows with Ulysses Klaue, one of the world’s most prominent Vibranium traffickers. The skirmish then turned into an attempt to usurp the throne. The political state of Wakanda was by no means transparent, but nothing in the world was air tight. Tony steered clear of their domestic squabble. The Avengers had enough to worry about. Wakandan’s were testy at best, and their secretive nature meant they would not take outside intervention kindly.

Tony downed the last quarter of his coffee. T’Challa had won another round of repartee with grace. The presentation ended with polite applause and the prince was free to mingle. Tony popped a mint into his mouth and approached the soon-to-be monarch. “Your Highness,” Tony greeted as he shook T’Challa’s hand.

“Dr. Stark.” T’Challa’s grip was firm but not overly so. The Dora Milaje’s gazes were trained on Tony’s face and hands. Tony flashed them a toothy grin, the one he reserved for the cameras.

“Impressive presentation. Despite what some might think, Wakanda is the most scientifically advanced nation in the world. I’m glad you’ve decided to join us.” As dishonest as niceties could
be, that wasn’t a lie. Tony was truly glad Wakanda had revealed itself during such a critical point. It opened a door for conversation. They all inhabited Earth, which made them natural allies in the war to come. Considering their enemy, the Avengers would need all the help they could get.

“The idea belongs to my father. For years, he worked towards opening our nation to the rest of the world. It is a shame he could not be with us today. He would have liked to meet you,” T’Challa smiled at Tony’s surprise. The genuine display of emotion broke the ice between them. The next time T’Challa spoke, there was a hint of laughter in his eyes. “My father is an admirer of your work. ‘It takes a special kind of man to protect the world and ask for nothing in return,’ he would say. He left The Avengers Official Code of Conduct on my desk one morning.”

“I—I’m honoured.” For the most part, Tony found hostility easier to swallow than praise, especially when it came from someone he respected. “I’ve always wanted to visit Wakanda.”

“We are working toward admitting visitors. When that day comes, you will be among the first to be granted a visa,” T’Challa said.

The prince of Wakanda was a captivating speaker. Their night was young and the bar was open. T’Challa echoed Tony’s suggestion for a drink. The pair talked more over a glass of champagne. Tony apologised for taking up all of the prince’s time, to which T’Challa replied that Tony was shielding him from unpleasant company.

Alcohol affected neither of them, Tony due to the diluted Super Soldier Serum, and T’Challa due to an unknown biological enhancement. Though despite their sobriety, sharing a drink was considered a universal sign of acceptance. After their second drink, T’Challa had loosened enough to ask something more personal.

“As the legacy of Iron Man grows, your early life is well documented, but I have a question no book has answered. I was hoping you would shed some light on the matter.” Tony angled his torso towards T’Challa. He spread out his arms, conveying the words ‘ask away’. T’Challa studied his drink. The alcohol bubbled in the crystal flute. “Why did you form the Avengers? Why take on the responsibility? The world would not thank you for what you have done, and it will harrow you for every mistake.”

It took Tony a second to register the question. He then laughed; the sound was loud and carefree. Tony saw T’Challa’s puzzled expression and explained, “It’s funny, what I’m about to say came from a fifteen-year-old. I don’t think anyone has said it better than him.” Tony smiled at the fond memories. “I once asked what got him out of bed each morning, and he replied, ‘when you can do the things that I can, but you don’t, and then the bad things happen.’” Tony looked T’Challa square in the eye, “…they happen because of you.”

“An insightful child,” T’Challa returned Tony’s gaze.

“The best,” Tony said. “I’m sensing there’s more to the question.”

T’Challa set the crystal flute on the counter and turned to face Tony. “As you well know, there are…oppositions to your plans for building a global suit of armour. Wakanda has joined the rest of the world, it is expected that we share our thoughts on these matters. You say the World Security Net protects us, but some claim it is an ill-conceived ploy for surveillance. My father has tasked me to access your true intentions.”

“What do you make of it?” Tony asked.

T’Challa took some time to word his response. “You are a good man, with a good heart, but it is
hard for a good man to lead, someone very wise taught me that.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Then let me ask you this: do you trust I’ll do the right thing?”

“If I had been asked this morning, I would have been doubtful. That is too much power for one man to possess, but having met you in person, I do. I trust my instincts; they are no longer wholly my own. One day, I will take on the mantle of the Black Panther. Bast guides the protectors of Wakanda.”

There was a pause in their conversation. “You’re with me?” Tony squinted. The situation was too good to be true.

“You have my support.” T’Challa nodded.

“Thank Christ. That’s one thing gone right.” Tony let out an exaggerated sigh. “You’re not worried I’ll play dirty once the Net is up, kitty cat?”

“You can try, but I assure you, Wakanda is a capable nation.” T’Challa’s smile bordered on a smirk. It was impossible not to mirror it. The prince was charming, Tony would give him that. “My sister, Shuri, finds the project fascinating. Though she questions if we will need it.”

“It’s a long story. You won’t believe half of it.”

“Try me.”

Tony ran a hand across his chin. He supposed there was no harm in telling the truth. “You’ve seen the footages of the first invasion? The Chitauri, big brawny things, unfriendly looking.”

T’Challa nodded. “The Battle of Mojave Desert was widely broadcasted.”

“Now there’s another army, and they are bigger and brawnier than the last batch. Earth will have no choice but to fight in the coming battle. I’m trying to amp up our chances.” Tony laid the facts out as straight-forward as he could. He’d expected ridicule, but T’Challa took the information with stride. This encouraged Tony to reveal more. “The trick is that I don’t have proof; Visions of the future don’t exactly count. Call me crazy, but there’s one thing I can’t do, and that’s nothing. As of this moment, we have time. We have the means to fight back. Why must we wait until the inevitable comes knocking to trip over ourselves? Failure is not an option. Billions depend on us.”

T’Challa remained silent throughout the revelation. “If it were an option, I’d invite you to join the Avengers.” Tony snuck a peek at the claw necklace above T’Challa’s suit.

“And I would have to respectfully decline,” T’Challa said.

“No hard feelings. You have your responsibilities, I have mine.” Tony tapped on the glow beneath his dress shirt. His fingernail connected with the arc reactor through a layer of fabric, dampening the noise. “But I need to ask something. Now I’m not saying it’ll come to that. Hell, I’ve been giving it everything just so it won’t come to that, but worst-case scenario, aliens break through the Net and it’s a full-scale invasion. Wakanda is the most scientifically advanced nation on the planet. Can we depend on your nation to fight?”

T’Challa smiled with the confidence and poise of a benevolent ruler, but his words revealed a competitive edge. “I assure you, Dr. Stark, if it ever came to that, Wakanda will not cower in the Avenger’s shadow. Earth is our home as much as it is yours.”
Tony sank into the back seat of his car. He told Happy to hit the gas. The talk with T’Challa went well. He gauged Wakanda’s stand on the Mad Titan’s army. Tony would lay off calling the royal family his ally, but they supported his efforts, which was as promising as things got nowadays.

A familiar buzz pulled Tony from his thoughts. Tony fished out his Stark pad and looked at the display.

Harley Keener—Facetime audio.

[Decline] [Accept]

Tony tapped the [Accept] key. The screen was black for a few seconds, then a smiling face appeared. “Tony!” Harley called. The shaking camera came to a stop as Harley placed his Stark pad on a flat surface.

Following that disastrous week in 2012, Earth entered a period of blissful peace. Tony’s earlier efforts had paid off. Due to both the Mind Stone and Space Stone being off-world, there was no Battle of Sokovia, which led to no Accords. The early demise of the World Security Council and Project Insight had saved S.H.I.E.L.D. from certain doom. Fury used Tony’s list to weed out most, if not all of the Hydra members from their ranks, and Tony’s early visit to Hydra’s Siberian facility had terminated the last of the Winter Soldiers.

Those uneventful years had been hard won and Tony made use of them. Though he hadn’t forgotten what could’ve happened. A kid from Tennessee stood out among the people absent from his life. Harley had played a vital role during the Mandarin fiasco, showing both strength and courage. After some brief mental debate, Tony gave into his curiosity and searched the kid up. A quick investigation revealed that Harley had been experiencing the same difficulties as last time, which was unacceptable. Tony made up some far-fetched excuse and included Harley into his Iron Spirit grant. He’d left the kid with his number too, just in case people started to simultaneously combust near his vicinity.

“Hey, kid. What’s goings on? You haven’t called in a while,” Tony said.

Harley had grown over the years. He was taller, albeit just as skinny, and his once cropped hair was now long enough to brush his shoulders. He peered at Tony though a fringe of wavy locks. A clever glint lit up his dark eyes. “Yeah, mom told me to ease off on the calls. She said I’m bothering you.”

“Nonsense, you can call whenever you want. I might not answer. You know, life happens, but you shouldn’t let that stop you,” Tony quipped.

“Great, ’cause I was gonna keep calling anyway,” Harley said non-apologetically. Tony burst out laughing. He was surrounded by cheekiness.

“That’s fine by me. Now why’d you call? Did little Mr. Genius run into trouble at the lab?”

Harley angled the camera to take in his workbench. He was in his garage, which had been
upgraded to a nerdy kid’s dream lab, courtesy of Stark Industries. At the centre of the surface were pieces of brightly coloured plastic. Some of the pieces dangled from a clear acrylic barrel. A folded name card sat inches away.

*Potato Gun Mark III.*

“I’m trying to increase my FPS, thought you could help,” Harley said.

“I thought your FPS was fine. You shot that lightbulb over my shoulder.” Tony sank deeper into the leather seats and poured himself a glass of water.

“That was a total fluke. Why would I shoot my own lightbulb? I was trying to scare you.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“You broke into my garage!”

The two worked on some schematics for the rest of Tony’s ride home. In all honesty, Tony liked Harley. The kid was mischievous, albeit in a cute way. He also kept Tony on his toes, but much like Selvig, Harley was just a kid with a clever mind. He couldn’t stop trucks, didn’t have nine lives. Tony kept his distance to protect him. He never once let slip any Avenger business. It was for the best that things stayed the way they were.

Happy dropped Tony off in front of Stark Tower then went to park the car. “Alright, this is my stop. You have enough to go on with. Call me if you need anything,” Tony said.

“Okay,” Harley nodded.

“See you later, alligator.” Tony winked.

“Ugh.” Harley rolled his eyes. The feed went black. Tony snickered at the dark screen. A soft ‘ding’ indicated the arrival of his private lift. Tony passed facial recognition and pressed the button for the penthouse. As he stared at the display, waiting for the number to count to sixty, something came to him.

Speaking of kids with potential, in the month leading up to July, Tony had been occupied with running the Avengers and preparing for Stark Expo 2016. Prior to that, he and Stephen had been on vacation. Tony hadn’t seen the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man for some time.

“Jarvis, what’s Peter up to?” Tony asked his faithful AI. The elevator doors parted, revealing his penthouse. Tony shrugged off his jacket and loosened his tie as he waited for Jarvis to sync with Peter’s suit.

“Sir…” Jarvis said after a pause. “Young Mr. Parker appears to be in trouble.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! So I'm away this week and don't have access to my laptop. I posted this chapter using my phone. I hope the formatting is correct. If not, I'll fix it when I get back. I'll have to stick to the 'two chapters in three weeks' schedule for one more round. Life has gotten better but I think I need the time to regroup. There will be an update on the 18th of July, and another one on the 29th of July.
Thanks for being awesome! ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Spider-Man, Spider-Man,
Does whatever a spider can
Spins a web, any size,
Catches thieves just like flies
Look Out!
Here comes the Spider-Man!

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter Parker swung through the concrete jungle of New York City. The HUD in his mask flashed real-time analysis of his surroundings. Peter snuck a glance at a sandwich joint rated five-stars on Urbanspoon. Maybe they’d squish the sandwich super flat for him just like Mr. Delma’s corner deli. Peter swung from building to building with practised ease. He’d endured the customary face-planting stage and came out on top. His left ankle stung from falling on it earlier. It was beginning to swell, but with his enhanced healing, his ankle should be under control before he had to head home.

Peter had been in class when his Stark phone updated the news of an armed robbery in Midtown. Though school wouldn’t finish for another hour, Peter couldn’t ignore the emergency he could clearly help defuse. He snuck out the window of his chemistry classroom and changed into his suit on the go. Peter webbed his backpack to a dumpster then rushed to the robbery a block away. The men wearing classic burglar masks had covered every inch of the bank, but Peter managed to sneak the hostages out undetected. Once the captees had fled the building, Peter swiftly webbed up the remaining criminals and snatched their guns.

The men had been experienced, and their leader even more so. He’d struck Peter off-balance with the butt of his rifle, then shot him in the face with a three-round burst. Due to their proximity, Peter avoided two of the bullets but couldn’t dodge the third. The chunk of metal struck his mask and shattered the acrylic covering his eye. Peter was immensely grateful that Mr. Stark had bullet-proofed his suit.

If Peter were to be honest with himself, he’d probably bit off more than he could chew. The situation could’ve gotten real messy, real fast, but considering how Spider-Man was outnumbered one to two dozen, Peter didn’t hesitate to label the mission a success.

A string of goo left Peter’s web shooters. The tip of the long string stuck to the façade of a skyscraper. Peter held onto the end of the oxidised rope and propelled his body through the air. He swung in a wide arc then let go, leaving the webbed building behind him. The momentum carried him past two smaller towers before he shot another web. As Peter repeated the motion, his adrenalin levels began to fall, and he realised that he was aching all over. Peter thought of calling it a night, but it was dinner time, and if he went home then he’d have to join for dinner. He couldn’t show his face when he still looked like he’d been runover by a truck.
Peter texted Aunt May and said he’d be hanging out at Ned’s then texted Ned to cover for him. It wasn’t a complete lie. He planned to drop by later. He’d taken a couple of hard landings today, so he could use the rest. There was also homework, which he was falling behind on.

In order to make time for his wall-crawler persona, Peter had no choice but to cut back on his usual activities. He’d quit the school band too. It hadn’t been an easy decision. Peter missed his band friends. He also missed playing the trumpet, but there were other things more important in his life now. Something had to give.

Peter would never forget the night Mr. Stark saved his uncle. He’d been watching helplessly from across the street. His enhanced senses had spotted the man carrying the pistol, but he’d been too far away. Peter didn’t have control over his powers back then and his uncle was in the man’s path. He heard a bullet escape the barrel of the gun. Peter had thought he’d lose his uncle forever. Then a miracle happened. A suit of red and gold appeared from thin air. It blocked the strike and told the man to stand down. Panicked, the man emptied his clip. The suit deflected the bullets as if it’d swatted away flies. Once the man was out of ammo, the red and gold figure apprehended him effortlessly.

Peter stood on the opposite side of the road with his jaw open. His uncle picked himself up from the pavement and shook the hand of the man who’d saved his life. The helmet of the suit peeled back and revealed the smiling face of none other than Tony freaking Stark.

Peter had been a fan of Iron Man since he was a toddler. He used to pick Iron Man toys for every happy meal. He still had a box of them back home. Aunt May had gotten him a scaled replica of the helmet for his eighth birthday and he’d worn it to Stark Expo. He’d waited for hours outside the doors for a glimpse of Iron Man. Luckily, security saw his dedication and let him slip through the barrier so he could see his hero up close; apparently Mr. Stark had a soft spot for kids. He remembered craning his head up to offer his autograph pad. He felt a dip on the pad, then a pat on his helmet, and before he could say a word of how cool Iron Man was, Mr. Stark was gone in a mad swirl of paparazzi, screaming fans and pushy security guards.

Across the road, Uncle Ben pointed in his direction. Mr. Stark saw him and waved. What happened next happened too fast for Peter to remember. His brain short-circuited and the next thing he knew, he was alone with Mr. Stark and he’d just revealed his secret identity to the godfather of modern-day superheroes.

Peter swung in another wide arc. His body had been trained to navigate these streets even as he spaced out. Unlike his homemade version, his new and improved suit didn’t restrict his movement. It was like an early Christmas every time he slipped into it to fight crime. Though unfortunately, something had marred the perfection of his two-pound ass-kicking machine. The shattered display of his left eye was distracting. The black rim twitched periodically, and he couldn’t see through the cracks very well. It wasn’t enough to render his left eye useless, but it did mess with his depth perception.

Peter yelped as he narrowly missed another fire escape. Nope, he couldn’t continue to hero like this. Perhaps he could swing by Stark Tower and ask Jarvis to fix the suit for him. The tower’s resident AI could control the bots in Mr. Stark’s lab, and he’d be gone before Mr. Stark noticed. A simple hardware replacement didn’t warrant the attention of Iron Man. At that thought, Peter felt less bad for breaking the multi-million-dollar suit entrusted in his care. He plotted a new course to Stark Tower and stopped in the alleyway to change back to his tee, jeans, and faded Converse. By now, the swell on his ankle had reached its peak size. It stung as Peter walked on it, but the tower was close. Peter hobbled along the pedestrian path. He waited for the lights to turn green then
approached the Midtown landmark.

Stark Tower was situated on a large, lush plot of land. It was also a corner block, which given its location, would’ve cost a ridiculous figure. The tower sat on a wide podium then tapered toward the top until it met the landing pad, creating its iconic shape. Aside from the penthouse and Mr. Stark’s private lab, the top ten floors of the tower were dedicated to research and development. Stark Industries owned another property upstate for Avengers operations. For unknown reasons, the tower was under strict guidelines to only be used for company business, but that didn’t dampen the public’s enthusiasm. On any given day, one could visit Stark Tower and see the public areas swarmed by tourists. Today was no exception.

New York was the city that never slept, and the neon-lit streets paved the way for night activities. The tower plaza was bustling with life, though as Peter limped closer, something about the crowd seemed off. A group had gathered outside the main entrance of the tower. Many held hand-painted signs raised high above their heads. They blocked off the people who wanted to go inside.

“Who’s Earth? Our Earth!” they chanted in union. “What do we want? Freedom! When do we want it? Now! And if we don’t get it? Shut it down!” A handful of protestors were harassing the employees entering and leaving the building. Spectators pointed at the angry mob with judgemental frowns. They must’ve been at it for some time. “Entitled, egotistic, and bribes his way! Iron Overlord go away!” they continued to chant. Peter was taken aback by the last sentence. He hobbled closer and read the messages on the signs.

Power to the people!

No World ‘Surveillance’ Net! No Iron Overlord!

Stand up! Fight back! Our freedom is under attack!

“Excuse me….sir? Excuse me!” Peter tapped a protestor on the shoulder. No response. He tried again with a harder poke. The man turned and gave Peter a dirty glare.

“What do you want?”

“Umm….what’s this all about? Why are you guys protesting against Mr. Stark?” Peter asked.

“Can’t you read, kid?” The man pointed at his own sign, which had the words ‘restrain his bloodstained hands’ painted in dark red, followed by the image of a pair of Iron Man gauntlets in handcuffs. “The Merchant of Death has escaped justice long enough. Now he wants to control our everyday lives?”

“Hey, that’s a bit unnecessary, don’t you think?” Peter felt a spike of annoyance threatening to surface. Had these people been living under a rock for the past eight years? Peter squashed his frustration before he spoke again; he didn’t want to sound rude. “Mr. Stark is protecting us. Weren’t you here for the Chitauri invasion? What if the aliens come back? We’ll need reinforcements.”

“That’s what he tells you. I’m not buying his excuse.” The man was giving Peter his full attention now, other protestors had turned too. “Make no mistake, Stark has us trapped in front of a pit and he’s about to push us in. Once the Net comes online, there’ll be no stopping him. We need to end this before it’s too late!”

“But Mr. Stark would never do anything like that. The Net is for emergencies. I think you guys are over-reacting,” Peter said.
“Look, kid, it’s easy to get distracted by the fancy suit and flashy technology, but he is not who you think he is.” The man shook his head as if he was among the few burdened with truth. “‘Iron Man’, your so-called hero, has killed innocents, lied through his teeth, and stolen what doesn’t belong to him.” The man unzipped his jacket. A logo was stitched on the breast-pocket of his worn shirt.  

A.I.M.

The brand looked familiar, but Peter couldn’t remember where he’d seen it. “Since the merge, we had no choice but to quit our jobs. Stark wouldn’t let us continue our experiments. He took away our injections and offered to ‘cure’ us. We rebranded as the ‘Anti-Iron Man Mob’ then used the past five years to unite others he’d wronged,” the man said as he zipped his jacket back up. “You’d be surprised by our numbers. The Avengers isn’t what it seems. Your hero is no hero at all.”

The sheer presumptuousness in his voice irked Peter; what an ungrateful jerk. “I hear the words that are coming out of your mouth, but you are wrong.” Peter crossed his arms. “Mr. Stark tries his best. His best has saved countless lives. What have you been doing to save the world, hmm? That’s right, nothing. In fact you’re doing less than nothing, because you’re making it hard for the people who are risking their lives for us.”

The man took an ominous step towards Peter. He was followed by others who had been listening to their conversation. “What did you just say, punk? You don’t know a thing.”

“I know you need professional help,” Peter quipped. Despite the nearing protestors, Peter stood his ground and lifted his chin. “You are the ones who don’t see how hard Mr. Stark works to keep this planet safe.”

“You know what, ever since you started talking, it’s been ‘Mr. Stark’ this, ‘Mr. Stark’ that.” The man narrowed his eyes. “You know him or something?”

The question took Peter by surprise. “Ugh…yeah, kinda?” Peter said. That was the wrong answer, because the protestors’ gaze hardened. The man lunged for Peter. Peter dodged to the left and landed on his bad ankle. He let out a cry of pain. The man saw the opening and grabbed Peter. “Hands off, man!” Peter’s shout was drowned out by the background chants. The man threw a punch, something Peter saw coming thanks to his Spidey sense. The fist grazed past Peter’s cheek and left a burning sensation. Peter wanted to break the man’s hold, but the crowd was too dense. He didn’t have space to manoeuvre, and he didn’t want to hurt anyone. The man raised his fist again. Peter tried to shield his face.

“Step away from the kid,” a stern voice said. Peter looked up at the sound. A red and gold armour dove down from the sky and came to a halt inches before them, causing both Peter and his attacker to step back. The suit hovered in mid-air. Its helmet retracted and revealed the face of a none-too-pleased Mr. Stark. Half a dozen Iron Sentries flew in behind him. They broke up the protestors.

“Hostile presence detected. Please stand down, or you will be escorted from the property,” the Iron Sentries said in union. The plaza speakers amplified the electronic voice.

“Now,” Mr. Stark emphasised. Peter had never seen him look so pissed.

The man let go of Peter. “I know my rights. You can’t tell us to leave.”

“Jarvis?” Mr. Stark asked.

“In accordance to New York State Law, citizens have the right to engage in peaceful protests on public sidewalks, parks, and streets. However, the owner of a private property has the right to
decide whether a protest is permitted on their grounds. Once rejected, those who do not heed this warning may be arrested for trespassing. Citizens may also not protest in a way that violates another group’s space or safety,” Jarvis said.

A brief pause fell over the group. “So, unless you and your friends can take me on in a fist fight, I suggest you scram,” Mr. Stark said. The man looked over his shoulder. Other protestors were fleeing the scene. Spectators were booing at him. He was on his own. The man scowled at Peter. He spat on the ground and left too.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark, but you didn’t have to come down here. I got that.” Peter fixed his mangled shirt and picked up the backpack he’d dropped.

“Don’t worry about it, kid.” Mr. Stark landed with a soft ‘thud’. He kept an eye over the remaining protestors. After the last one had fled, he waved at the Iron Sentries and the metallic suits returned to the tower. He gave Peter a once over. “What happened to you? You look a mess.”

“I—uh—”

“There may be a direct correlation between Spider-Man’s presence at an earlier bank robbery and Mr. Parker’s injuries,” Jarvis said.

Mr. Stark arched an impeccably groomed eyebrow. He donned his sunglasses. The red tinted shades fed him analysis of the earlier robbery. Peter caught a glimpse of surveillance footage inside the bank. The tiny window showed Spider-Man fall flat on his ass.

“Well, kid,” Mr. Stark said after the video ended. “Keep this up, and you’ll make enough ruckus to get a Ben & Jerry's flavour named after you, like Spider Surprise.”

“Really?” Peter asked, the irony of the situation flying over him. “What's in it?”

“No one knows; it's a surprise.” Mr. Stark lowered his shades and looked at Peter over the gold rim. “And oh yeah, you’re grounded.”

“What?” Peter gasped. He didn’t know what he’d expected but being reprimanded wasn’t one of them. He’d saved a bank full of hostages, surely Mr. Stark saw that?

“Jarvis, lock down the suit.” Mr. Stark said to his companion AI.

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

“You heard me.” Mr. Stark redirected his attention to Peter. “I said no hero stuff during school hours. Your aunt’s worried about your grades. They’ve been skiing downhill since you started shooting webs.” Mr. Stark sighed. “And those were people with guns. What were you thinking? You are fifteen, not fifty. This is your first year out on the streets. First you cut class, now you’re starting fights on plazas.”

“That wasn’t me! He started throwing punches and—”

“You could’ve walked away.”

“But he was talking bad about you. And—and telling lies! What was I supposed to do, just let him be?”

“Kid…” Mr. Stark took a step forward. The nanoparticles encasing him retracted into his arc reactor. He was dressed in a maroon pinstripe suit. Peter picked up a whiff of champagne mixed
with the evening’s cologne. He placed a hand on Peter’s shoulder. “There will be times when people don’t agree with each other, and that’s fine. You can’t go around trying to convince every schmuck and his sidekick, there aren’t enough hours in the day.” Peter looked away, but Mr. Stark kept talking. “Forget about them, please. What happened to staying close to the ground? Helping out the little people, like that lady who brought you the churro.”

“You knew about the churro?” Peter snuck a glance at Mr. Stark.

“I read your messages kid, good job.” Mr. Stark lifted his hand on Peter’s shoulder to give him a pat on the back. “Now let’s have it.” He gestured to the suit in Peter’s backpack. “I’ll give it a tweak and send it back to you, but if you do anything shifty, I’ll know.”

“That won’t be necessary—,” Peter was cut off by a finger on his forehead.

“I’ll. Know,” Mr. Stark repeated. “Make use of this time, lay low and do some homework, polish up your grades. You are a smart kid, Pete. It’s never too early to start thinking about college. I’ve got some pull at MIT.” Mr. Stark turned on his heels. He made way for the tower. When Peter stayed rooted to the spot, he stopped and beckoned for Peter to follow. “Come on, we’ll patch you up and have Happy drop you off. Can’t have you going home looking like you’ve been robbed.”

“Oh—okay!” Peter beamed. He grabbed his backpack and caught up with his mentor.

Perhaps his day wasn’t so bad after all.

Chapter End Notes

Who else is ready for Supreme Family???:D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
“Let me get this right,” Stephen lowered the volume he’d been reading on interdimensional time-travel. “He saved more than thirty people, yet you grounded him.”

Tony propped his pillow against the headboard of the bed. He flipped on his side to face the man next to him. “Against two dozen robbers. Those people were armed. They wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him down. In fact, they already gave it their best shot. It was a wild stroke of luck no one got killed.”

After they had sent Peter home, Tony gave the earlier incident a more thorough review. He was convinced he’d made the right decision by locking down Peter’s suit. Tony ran a hand over his face. Everything began when he brought Peter to Leipzig. Like he had admitted before, he’d been desperate at the time, and bringing a street-level hero who could capture his teammates without hurting them seemed like a good idea. He made the suit for Peter in this life because he didn’t want the Spiderling to fight crime in pyjamas, but in hindsight, perhaps he’d given the kid more responsibility than he was prepared for.

If Peter had been in his home-made gear, he would’ve thought twice before taking on a gang of armed men. His shiny new suit had given him the illusion that he was invincible. Peter wasn’t ready for the bigger picture yet. The shattered eyepiece lying on Tony’s workbench was evidence enough.

“He’s giving it his best.” Stephen turned to face Tony too. He closed the book and placed it on the nightstand. “Like you said, he’s new to this. He needs time to learn. Remember when we first started? It was madness.”

“Exactly.” Tony sat up at those words. “How many people did we put in harm’s way? Back then, we were ill-prepared and had no choice, but it’s different for him. There are professionals who handle these sort of things. He’s not working with the best role model when it comes to impulse control.”

“Tony.” Stephen gave him that look which never failed to make Tony lower his gaze. Familiar words of reassurance hung between them. Stephen let them slip by unsaid this time; over the years he’d muttered them a hundred times.

“I just…” Tony sighed. He stared at the off-white ceiling as if it’d grow a mouth and blurt out all the answers. “This is precisely why I didn’t want him to join the Avengers.”

“But he hasn’t joined,” Stephen said. “It’s not official. The ‘trainee’ on his name badge is there for a reason.”

“It’s only a matter of time before he passes the test we haven’t made up yet, then he’ll be out there
on his own.” Tony closed his eyes. He wanted to catch a break, but instead he was at Leipzig and Peter had just taken a heavy hit. Spider-Man lay on the concrete runway, his face hidden from view. Tony flew to him. He wasn’t moving. Please don’t be dead. Tony thought to himself.

“Please. Oh god this is my fault.”

“You have faith in him.” Stephen’s words pulled Tony from his thoughts.

“Of course I do. That kid’s going places,” Tony said.

“Then have faith he’ll figure something out.” Stephen placed a comforting hand on Tony’s arm. “You pretend like you don’t care, but you care too much. You take on too much responsibility and try to solve too many problems. You are not accountable for other people’s choices. Peter may not be of age yet, but he soon will be. You didn’t tell him to put on a costume and fight crime. He made that choice, over and over again, for every day that he was Spider-Man.” Stephen’s eyes were piercing in the dim bedroom. They had spent some of the toughest moments of their lives with each other. Those moments had bonded them in ways words never could. Stephen knew him, understood him, inside and out. “That applies to me too. Whatever happens down the track, I want you to know I chose this path.”

“Knock on wood.” Tony sprung from the mattress and knocked on the headboard twice. “Don’t say that again. I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Really? Superstition?” The corners of Stephen’s eyes crinkled as he smiled.

“You’re a wizard. I fly around in a tin can. Anything is possible.” The quip didn’t achieve Tony’s desired effect. Instead of lightening the mood, Stephen’s smile faded from his lips.

“Tony, we’ve been avoiding this conversation for a long time. I know we are doing everything we can to nullify the threat, but I still think we should talk about this,” Stephen said. “War is coming. The Avengers need you at the helm. If there ever comes a time where one of us has to—”

Tony had been doing this long enough to know where Stephen was going. He looked the other man square in the eyes. “No. It won’t come down to that.”

“You don’t know for sure. In the futures I’ve seen...”

“Then we’ll do it together.” Tony leaned in until they were inches apart. “The Avengers is a joined effort. I can’t lead the team on my own. Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.” Stephen pursed his lips. Tony had him backed up against the headboard. Stephen had nowhere to run. “Come on...promise to be straight up with me. I won’t hide anything if you won’t.” Tony knew he sounded desperate, but that was the point. Stephen was the one person he could be honest with. In the safety of their home, Tony didn’t have to hide. He was free to love and be loved in return.

“Alright,” Stephen murmured hesitantly.

“That’s a good wizard.” Tony rolled on top of Stephen and peppered a trail of kisses down the nape of the other man’s neck. They breathed in each other’s scent. Stephen’s moisturiser was fused with notes of citrus and sandalwood. Tony unbuttoned Stephen’s shirt and pushed it out of his way. He continued the trail across Stephen’s shoulders, and then down his chest. Something poked Tony’s stomach.

“Are you packin’ a rod, or are you just happy to see me?” Tony slurred. Stephen chuckled at the cheesy one-liner. Tony quickly returned to his side of the bed and opened the top drawer of his nightstand. Stephen lifted his brows when instead of something more appropriate for the occasion,
Tony pulled out a tiny square box. Stephen’s eyes widened as realisation dawned. He’d given Tony something similar not long ago. Stephen opened the box that was presented to him. The miniature storage compartment was lined with velvet. Sandwiched between two cushions was a silver ring.

Stephen removed the ring to study it. The design was minimalistic, much like the one he’d gifted Tony, but in place of the twinkling diamond was a strip of dark metal. A matching row of inscription was etched on the inside of the band.

*You complete me, S.S.*

Tony smiled as Stephen connected the dots. The dark strip of metal was a piece of shrapnel that had been removed from his chest. They’d been stored in a jar since his surgery, waiting to see daylight again. Despite the event associated with the shrapnel, those tiny pieces of metal had been what started his journey as Iron Man. They might have parted ways, but the shrapnel would always remain a part of Tony. Stephen was the piece that completed him. Tony could think of no better metaphor than giving his fiancée a literal fragment of his heart.

Tony took the band and picked out Stephen’s ring finger. He pushed the band all the way to the bottom. The size was perfect because Tony had stolen one of Stephen’s old rings to make sure it was correct. “What do you think?” Tony licked his lips. Now that it was on, he was no longer so sure of himself. Was it too simple? The one Stephen gave him had a huge charmed rock.

“…Thank you.” The corner of Stephen’s eyes reddened. He took Tony’s ringed hand and entwined it with his own. Despite being made separately, the rings came together well. They resembled a coordinated set. Tony was proud of himself. “I love you,” Stephen said after he’d admired the rings together.

Tony’s chest was filled with something light and airy. Stephen’s magic must be improving, because he simply made him happy. Tony lifted Stephen’s hand and kissed it.

Stephen’s hands were unique. Perfect for their imperfection. In place of flesh and bones, those fingers now mended space and time. Tony touched the scars that ran down the length of those long, slender digits. It was almost as if some form of higher power had seen his neglected childhood, his lonesome adolescence, and his betrayal laced adulthood and said ‘alright, time to add up all the misfortunes and make up for them’. Because of Stephen, Tony had a bond to protect, a partner to trust, and a shoulder to lean on.

“Love you too, Stephanie.” Tony pressed their foreheads together and kissed his fiancée again.

Whatever trials and tribulations he had to endure to live the life he has now, it was worth it.

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Peter opened the front door of his family apartment. The apartment was dark. His aunt and uncle must’ve already turned in for the night. Peter stayed close to the walls and inched across the living room one step at a time. He avoided all the creaky floorboards. Peter breathed a sigh of relief when he had a foot in the hallway.
And then the lights came on.

“Look who decided to show up,” Aunt May said. She sat on the old armchair near the window with her legs crossed and her arms folded. The reading lamp illuminated her disappointed features. “Where have you been? Ben stopped by Ned’s to pick you up. You weren’t there.”

“I—uh—hey, May,” Peter said. He removed his backpack and tightened his hold on the straps.

“Well?” Aunt May got up from her seat. She approached Peter and stopped a step short of reaching him.

“I… was at… the Stark Internship,” Peter forced out. He grimaced at the idea of Mr. Stark taking another hit for him. Sorry Mr. Stark. “Yeah, the Stark Internship. It ran over time and I knew how you felt about it, so…” Peter let his sentence trail off. He felt so bad for lying to his aunt. She wanted the best for him, but what was he supposed to say, that he’d stopped a robbery then got into a mob fight?

Aunt May’s gaze softened at Peter’s response. She ran a hand through his hair and fixed his crooked shirt. It was a bit loose after the protestor nearly tore it to shreds. She frowned at the ill-fitting clothes, but let it slip by without mentioning it. “Peter…I know how much you look up to Tony. I have nothing against him. He saved Ben’s life. I’m just… worried about you. The school rang me today. They said you skipped class again. Last year you were the top of your class, but now… I thought you might need some time to figure things out, catch your breath. You can’t do any of that if you are stuck in that internship all day.” Aunt May sighed. She gave Peter a pat on the shoulder. “Do you have anything you want to tell me?”

“No.” Peter’s response came out too quickly to be true.

“Nothing?” Aunt May asked again.

“Nothing.” Peter forced out a smile. “Everything’s fine. Like you said, I need some time to figure things out, but trust me, quitting the internship definitely won’t help,”

“Alright.” Aunt May didn’t look convinced, but to Peter’s relief, she didn’t press any further. The living room was still with both inhabitants occupied by their own thoughts. Just as Peter was starting to get uncomfortable, Aunt May took a step back. She glanced over Peter’s full height and placed a hand over her mouth. “I still can’t believe it. Two more years and you’ll be a senior. I remember it like yesterday. You used to be this tall.” Aunt May levelled her hand with her waist. “You used to sleep with the lights on every night so monsters couldn’t get you.”

“I thought we agreed to stop talking about that!” Peter said. His aunt loved to bring up stories of when he was a kid. It was so embarrassing.

“Now look at you, all grown up.” Aunt May smiled. There was a hint of wetness in her eyes. She blinked, and the moisture was gone. “You know what’s best for you.”

“Thanks, May.” Peter returned her smile. “I won’t let you down.”

“You better not, young man,” Aunt May said. She threaded her fingers through Peter’s hair one more time. They talked a bit about school before Aunt May yawned. “Ah…it’s getting late. I’m going to call it a night. There’s larb in the kitchen if you’re hungry,” she kissed Peter on the forehead and made way for her room.

“I’m fine. I ate at Mr. Stark’s. I mean, at the internship. Good night, May.” Peter watched his aunt disappear down the hallway. The moment she was out of sight, Peter sprinted to the bathroom and
brushed his teeth in record time. Once his bedroom door had been closed and locked, he unzipped his backpack and pulled out his suit.

Mr. Stark had patched up the damage in no time. He even got Mr. Strange to trace some runes onto it. The runes were invisible most of the time but would activate when Peter was in danger. He saw Mr. Strange do some complicated hand gestures and the magic symbols appeared. It was the coolest thing ever. Mr. Strange then baked them lasagne for dinner. His mentor was doing really well for himself.

Peter could barely contain his excitement. He called Ned. It was late, but Ned had a habit of browsing forums without keeping an eye on the clock. His best friend had stumbled upon his secret persona one night when he came home, in costume, without knowing that Ned was in his room. Peter cringed in memory of the shattered Lego Death Star. He waited for the call to connect. Ned picked up on the second ring.

“Hey man,” Peter’s self-dubbed ‘man in the chair’ greeted.

“Ned, I need your help.” Peter cut straight to the chase. “Can you come over tomorrow after school? I think I finally found the chance to prove myself.”

“Wait, prove yourself, as in prove prove yourself?” Ned asked.

“Yeah, prove prove myself.” Peter flopped onto his bed. “You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting for this moment. It could be nothing, but it could also be something… Ned, I’ve got to impress Mr. Stark so he’ll let me on the team for real.”

“Awesome…” Ned marvelled. Peter could picture Ned staring at the wall behind his laptop with his jaw open. “I’m totally in. Oh—and can you show me how to spin webs again?”

“Yeah, I’ll show you again, but please don’t web my head to the wall this time. The web fluid takes two hours to dissolve.”

“No promises. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Cool, bye Ned.” Peter hung up. He lay on his bed and stared at the mattress above him. Criss-crossing wires held up the top bunk that was currently being used for storage. At this distance, Peter could make out the frayed texture of every thread used to weave the fabric. The bite from the radioactive spider had amped his senses up to eleven. It was crazy to think how a small accident could change his life forever.

Peter tossed and turned as he played the day’s event over in his head. Mr. Stark might think he was doing him a favour by locking down the suit, but it was the exact opposite. Peter was ready for more. He only messed up at the bank because he was inexperienced. If Mr. Stark would let him join the Avengers training sessions, that problem would be fixed in no time.

Peter wanted to prove himself so badly. All he needed was a chance to work with the team, but Mr. Stark wouldn’t give him that. He refused to take Peter out on any of the real missions, said it was for his own good.

Peter knew he was still a trainee Avenger. He was the only trainee Avenger, but that doesn’t mean he was any less capable than the others. He wouldn’t have this gift unless he was meant to use it. He wanted to show his mentor that he hadn’t made a mistake by recruiting him.

He just wanted his childhood hero to be proud of him.
So I'm back with real life stuff all caught up! I'll return to my weekly update schedule starting from next Sunday. Here's to hoping things stay nice and mellow. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Peter sat on the floor with his legs crossed. He had his back against the dresser and was browsing webpages using his phone. Ned lounged on the bottom bunk with his laptop propped on his stomach. Rapid tapping noises bounced off the walls of Peter’s room. Ned typed ridiculously fast. Peter found the sound soothing on most days. Sadly, today hasn’t been one of them.

“There’s nothing here. Are you sure they’re a real organisation?” Ned asked. “If they are, then their marketing strategies are seriously lacking.”

“No, I’m sure. That’s what the guy said. Why would he lie about that?” Peter bounced up from the floor. He leaned on the mattress and watched Ned comb through the search engines one more time. Ned was right. There was nothing on the web. Peter’s own efforts had yielded similar results.

It was now 10:17 p.m. They had spent the entire afternoon trying to gather information on the Anti-Iron Man Mob. So far, all they had accumulated were a few screenshots of angry tweets. The evidence pointed to a dead-end, but Peter couldn’t get that tingling feeling off his back. The protestors at Stark Tower had been too organised. There was a sense of camaraderie between them, and their shared anger seemed too strong to be a coincidence. Peter stared at Ned’s search results. This time, something jumped out at him.

Anti-Iron Man Mob.

A.I.M.M.

A.I.M.

Peter thought back to the logo on the protestor’s shirt. “Hey man, can you search up A.I.M.? It’s an acronym. All caps, with dots in between the letters.” Ned’s fingers ghosted over the keypad. The number of search results multiplied tenfold. They clicked on the first article. It was dated 14th of May 2012.

*How far is too far? Iron Man accused of manslaughter.*

*Four years since Tony Stark announced to the world that he was Iron Man, the billionaire industrialist has taken ‘privatising world peace’ to new heights. It was revealed earlier today that Stark had been responsible for the mysterious disappearance of Aldrich Killian, former CEO and lead scientist of Advanced Idea Mechanics.*

*Advanced Idea Mechanics, also known as A.I.M., was a notable organisation in the field of gene*
therapy. Stark Industries purchased A.I.M. after its stock value plummeted in the wake of Killian’s disappearance. The headless organisation exchanged hands for less than half of the market price.

At first glance, it would seem that America’s national hero had committed first-degree murder for the mighty dollar. Lucky for Iron Man, the reveal had been accompanied by substantial evidence to suggest otherwise. Authorities have yet to reveal any specifics, but according to those who’d seen the footages, Stark had acted in self-defence. Furthermore, additional evidence tied Killian to a sinister conspiracy theory which ‘A.I.M.ed’ to manipulate the War on Terror.

To make matters even more bizarre, the morally dubious turn of events had been revealed by none other than Stark himself, hours before the vote that would determine the leader of the Avengers. Despite all the looming controversy, the revelation hadn’t shaken Iron Man’s authority. To the surprise of no one, Iron Man won the superhero election. Stark went on to lead the Avengers with full votes. The reveal hadn’t seemed shocking to his teammates. Had the rest of the team known? And if they did, had the killing of Killian been a unanimous decision? Why did Stark wait until the eve of ‘election day’ to reveal something he’d already gotten away with?

The article went on to break down what superheroes acting without jurisdiction could mean for the average citizen. “Hey, I remember this. It was a huge deal at the time,” Ned said.

Peter skimmed through the rest of the article. He took Ned’s mouse and opened more browsers. They said similar things. The case dragged on for a few months then faded from public view. Authorities never did release further explanation. “This must be it. Their logo matches the one I saw on the protestor’s shirt.” Peter flipped off the bed. He opened the hatch on the roof and a bundle of fabric fell down. Peter grabbed the suit that was dangling in mid-air by a piece of string. He shook it loose and laid it flat on the floor.

“What are you doing?” Ned asked. Peter carefully peeled back the outer layer of the suit, revealing an impressive network of wires. Peter fished out a flashlight from a box on his desk, turned it on, and bit into the handle to hold it in place with his mouth. He plugged a data cable into the spider-shaped chest piece and used it to connect the suit to Ned’s laptop.

“Remoffing the traaffer.” Peter mumbled without spitting out the flashlight.

“Why are we removing the tracker from your suit?” Ned typed in a line of code hesitantly.

“Uh, because I’m going to spy on these guys,” Peter said between bursts of operating the flashlight, “and…I don’t really want Mr. Stark to know about it.”

“So you are lying to Iron Man now?”

“No, I’m not lying. He just doesn’t get what I can do yet.” Peter searched the metallic matrix embedded into the fabric. “Gotta!” He pulled out a tiny disc with a pair of tweezers. “Alright Happy, enjoy tracking this lamp.” Peter stuck the tracker on the side of his lampshade.

Ned made sense of the suit’s programming while Peter had been working. “There’s a ton of other subsystems in here, but they are all disabled by the…Training Wheels Protocol.” Ned snickered.

“What Training Wheels Protocol?” Peter joined Ned in front of the screen. He stared at the red text. Peter could swear the vibrant pixels were mocking him. “Turn it off!”
“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Ned said as data flowed down the right-hand side of his split screen. “I mean, they are probably blocked for a reason.”

“Come on man, I don’t need training wheels.” Peter kicked the rug in frustration. “I’m sick of him treating me like a kid all the time. It’s not cool!”

“But you are a kid,” Ned deadpanned.

“Yeah, a kid who can stop a bus with his bare hands.”

“Peter, I just don’t think this is a great idea. I mean, what if this is illegal?”

“Look, please.” Peter kneeled beside the bed and gave Ned his best puppy dog eyes. “This is my chance to prove myself. I can handle it, plus it could be nothing. Maybe the guy was just some random dude who’s all talk and no walk. I’ll only be taking a peek. Ned, come on.”

“I really don’t think this is a good idea—”

“The guy in the chair,” Peter whispered.

“Don’t do that.” Ned looked away.

“Come on…” Peter gave Ned’s shoulder a gentle nudge. Ned sighed. After another pause, he typed something into his keypad. Peter’s suit lit up. A surge of electricity ran down the matrix of wires. “You’re the best.” Peter gave his best friend a fist bump. He unplugged the suit and changed into it. “Remember, don’t let my aunt or uncle come in. If they knock, pretend we’re busy.”

“Got it. Be careful.”

Peter nodded. He slid out the bedroom window and crawled onto the roof of his apartment building. The wind was warm this time of the year, perfect for hero work. Peter cracked his knuckles then did a few star-jumps for warmup. Ready to swing into the night, Peter slipped on his mask.

“Good evening Peter,” an enthusiastic female voice greeted.

“Hello? Hello?” Peter hunched instinctively. He surveyed his surroundings, but he was alone on the rooftop. His HUD was going berserk. A flurry of icons reconfigured before his eyes, most of which he’d never seen before.

“Congratulations on completing the rigorous Training Wheels Protocol and gaining access to your suit’s full capabilities,” the voice continued to say. She sounded way too happy to be here.

“Ah, thank you.” Peter was starting to get it now. The voice was coming from within his mask. That was beyond cool. Was she like Jarvis? Had Mr. Stark given him his own AI? He should’ve disabled that stupid protocol sooner.

“So where would you like to take me tonight?” suit lady asked.

“I—uh—I know an organisation. They are the bad guys.”

“Permission to know name of organisation.”

“A.I.M., and the Anti-Iron Man Mob. They might be related.”

“Insufficient data concerning Anti-Iron Man Mob. Advanced Idea Mechanics was purchased by
Stark Industries on 9th of October, 2010. All company properties had been repurposed for Stark Industries use. It may be advisable to contact Mr. Stark prior to commencing your search.”

“Oh, no! There’s no need to contact Mr. Stark.” Peter flailed his arms as he tried to get suit lady’s attention. “Wait, did you say everything had been repurposed?”

“Yes, Peter. All labs and warehouses are now under Stark Industries use. They have been outfitted with state-of-the-art surveillance systems. We can try to get you in, but it’s strongly recommended that you avoid research facilities stationed with Iron Sentries.” A wireframe of an Iron Sentry appeared on Peter’s HUD.

“Hold up, suit lady, I don’t want to break into Mr. Stark’s lab.” Peter sighed. He walked over to an exhaust outlet and slouched on the sheet metal box. “If they are used by Stark Industries then obviously bad guys can’t operate there. I thought I was on to something.”

“Perhaps I could search up alternative keywords?” suit lady suggested.

Peter thought about it for a second. “What about Aldrich Killian?”

“Here is a complete list of notable properties owned by Aldrich Killian. All but one had been confiscated following his arrest. The Norco was an oil tanker owned by Roxxon Oil. Aldrich Killian acquired it in 2010 after the Norco spilled a million gallons of crude oil off the coast of Pensacola. He left the tanker to a staff member in his pre-written will. Hmm…that’s strange,” suit lady pondered.

“What’s strange?” Peter sat up.

“The Norco is currently docked in Red Hook Terminal, twelve miles from your location. It has never been to New York before.”

“That is strange. Do you think we should check it out?”

“Plotting course to target,” suit lady answered by skipping straight to action. A map of Queens appeared on Peter’s HUD. It would take thirty minutes to drive to Red Hook Terminal. He could hitch a lift on the back of passing trucks.

“Okay, well as long as I make it back in time for a few hours of sleep, it should be fine.” Peter shot a web at the adjacent apartment building. Once the web was secure, he jumped over the railing. With a sequence of movements his body had memorised, Peter swung into the night.

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Red Hook Marine Terminal was an intermodal freight transport facility located across the river from Lower Manhattan. Two red, blue, and white container cranes dominated the waterfront. Their towering apexes pierced the ink-black sky. Behind them were rows upon rows of stacked containers. Peter gently touched down on one of the cranes. He crawled until he reached the tip of the loading arm.
“A hundred metres from target,” suit lady said. “The Norco is the second ship from the left. Three heat signatures detected on top deck. Their body temperatures are abnormally high.”

“Why is their secret layer in a ship? That’s so lame.” Peter sprung from the tip of the loading arm. He swung to the adjacent crane so that he was aligned with the Norco’s deck. Masked by darkness, Peter lowered himself a few feet at a time. He landed on top of the control room undetected. “Hey suit lady, what are they doing?”

“Do you want to hear what they are saying?”

“I can hear what they are saying? Uh, yeah?”

“Activating enhanced reconnaissance mode.”

Peter’s HUD darkened. The tinted display granted him infrared vision. “I don’t know why Savin keeps us up here. It’s been five years since boss was killed. Stark’s forgotten all about us,” one of the men on patrol said. Two of them had been strolling together while the third kept watch on the opposite side of the deck.

“Doesn’t hurt to be careful after those idiots caused a scene yesterday. Lucky none of the enhanced went with them. We need to lay low. Two more days and we’ll get our revenge,” the second man said.

“Wow, they are plotting something. I can catch them all red-handed. This is awesome.” Peter whispered. He lowered his centre of gravity and peered over the edge of the roof. “But first I’ll need some evidence. I’m gonna get a little closer so I can see what’s happening.”

“Would you like me to engage enhanced combat mode?” There was no dampening suit lady’s cheer.

“Enhanced combat mode?” Peter mused. “Yeah.”

“Activating instant kill.”

“No no no no no, I don’t want to kill anybody!”

“Deactivating instant kill.”

Peter sighed a breath of relief. He leapt from his spot and fired his web shooter at a nearby post, but instead of the usual string of webs, his hand gasped nothing. Peter face-planted onto the deck.

“Who’s there!” The men on patrol snapped around at the noise.

“What the hell just happened! What was that?” Peter got back on his feet. He ducked behind a storage box, just in time to avoid being seen.

“You jumped off the roof and landed on your face,” suit lady said.

The men were getting close. Peter shot another web at the post. Only a short burst came out. “Suit lady, what’s wrong with my web shooters?”

“Rapid fire is the default for enhanced combat mode.”

“Why would I need rapid fire?”

“Would you like to see more options? You have five hundred and seventy-six possible
combinations.”

Peter lifted his hands. Stacks of icons appeared on each of his fingers. “Mr. Stark really over did it…”

“Peter, behind you!” suit lady warned. Peter whipped around. His Spidey sense screamed for him to duck. He heeded that advice and rolled out of the way. A bullet sank into the storage box behind him.

“Intruder!” the first man alerted.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!” A trail of bullets followed Peter as he dived for cover. He chose a web at random and watched it sail clean past the man on his tail. “Wrong option! Suit lady just set everything back to normal!”

“Restoring all systems.”

Peter shot another web at the post. This time it was finally the correct setting. He pulled on the translucent rope and the force propelled him through the air. Peter landed back on the roof of the control room. He shot a series of webs with lightning fast reflexes, sticking two men to the railing and tipping one overboard.

The frantic beeping of Peter’s HUD masked his clever quip. “Rising heat signature detected,” suit lady said. Peter flipped off the roof. A spurt of fire soared past his back. It melted the area he’d been crouching on and set the entire control room ablaze. Chunks of molten glass sizzled as it landed on the deck, igniting the wooden planks. Peter squinted at the burning wreckage. Someone was crossing it despite the heat.

“Hey spider boy… I’ll play with you.” A woman emerged from behind the flames. She had cropped red hair that spiked up in all directions. Scars ran down the left side of her face, though that was not what Peter had been focusing on. The woman’s eyes glowed orange in the darkness. She also happened to be on fire.

“Ellen Brandt, former Major of the United States Armed Forces and an agent of A.I.M.” Suit lady pulled up the woman’s file from nowhere. “She was one of the original test subjects infused with the Extremis virus. After A.I.M.’s merge with Stark Industries was finalised, she went into hiding with others still loyal to Killian. Be careful, Peter. Earlier iterations of the virus are extremely volatile. According to incomplete data, she can generate heat up to several thousand degrees Celsius.”

“She can breathe fire? O—okay—” Peter croaked. Brandt closed in menacingly. Faint crackling noises alerted Peter of the movement behind him. The two men who had been stuck to the railing re-joined the right. Their eyes were glowing orange too. They must’ve burned through Peter’s webs.

Peter backtracked until his back was pressed against the entrance of the ship’s hold. The three Extremis users exchanged looks with each other and smiled. Peter had a feeling it was going to be a very long night.

Chapter End Notes
I've said this in a couple of replies in the past few weeks, but the Vulture won't be appearing in this fic because Adrian Toomes got his first cache of Chitauri tech from the Battle of New York. In Anew, the Battle of Mojave Desert was contained relatively well, so they wouldn't have brought a sub-contractor like Toomes onto the scene. But on the other hand, Tony never had that seaside battle with the Extremis soldiers...so... ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Stephen stood in the living room of the Malibu mansion. He couldn’t remember why he was here. He had a feeling he’d forgotten something important, but the more he thought about it, the more the reason escaped him.

“Honey, dinner’s ready.” Tony called from the open-plan kitchen. His face was obscured by the steam of food simmering on the stove. That was…odd, but Stephen couldn’t place a finger on why it was odd.

“Smells great,” Stephen heard himself say. He took a step toward Tony and questioned the sluggishness of his body. He was supposed to be nimbler than this. Stephen held up his hands. His nails were well-manicured. His fingers hovered perfectly still in the air. Those were the hands of a surgeon.

Behind him, a strip of floor-to-ceiling windows framed the horizon. A vast expanse of ocean rippled under the seaside breeze. Dusk dyed the sky blood red. “How’s work?” Tony asked. Stephen didn’t answer. He stared at the sinking sun. There was a black dot at its centre and it was getting bigger. As the seconds ticked by, the small blemish transformed into a narrow circle. The lower right-hand quarter of the circle flared out and met at a ninety-degree angle, resembling a Q-shape.

Stephen drew in a sharp breath. The familiar shape punctured the veil of fog that had been clouding his memories. Tony, run! Stephen wanted to shout, but instead his counterpart walked toward the window and studied the unusual object with a hand on his chin.

“What the—is that a spaceship?” Tony joined him. He was wearing a thin cotton shirt. The loosely buttoned top exposed his tanned chest. The flat patch of skin was unmarred. No arc reactor. No scars.

“It’s not…slowing down?” Stephen said. He and Tony backed away from the window.

The Q-ship opened fire. Stephen watched the bullets pierce the window before him and sink into his abdomen. He fell to the ground. Stephen’s vision spun. He looked for Tony and spotted him on a pile of shattered glass. Blood seeped from the holes on Tony’s chest. Stephen crawled toward Tony and covered him with his own body, but the second wave of bullets never came.

A mutilated creature climbed in from the opening on the wall. Its thick skin was infused with strips of armour. Four arms extended from the creature’s back. It surveyed the inhabitants of the building then shrieked a terrifying sound. The creature ripped Stephen from Tony and tossed him into the ocean.

Stephen couldn’t feel any pain. Or perhaps he was in so much pain his body stopped registering it.
What Stephen could feel was water entering his nostrils. He thrust against the current, trying to gain his bearings, but he kept sinking deeper and deeper, then suddenly, he was falling.

Stephen landed on a plane of concrete. The sound of repulsor fire snapped him from his trance. He craned his neck toward the direction of the noise. Tony was fighting two familiar figures in an abandoned bunker. A row of columns made up the far wall. Beyond it, a blizzard was forming. Wind howled across the snow-laden mountains, masking the event that was unfolding in a place the world had long forgotten.

No. Stop! Stephen shouted. He lunged forward, but his body phased through the brawling trio. He crashed to the ground and tumbled until he was stopped by one of the columns. Stop... Stephen murmured. He laid there with his back to the fight. He covered his face with his trembling hands.

The act of violence progressed undisturbed by the sombre landscape. Tony was beaten to the ground. Captain America jumped on top of him and struck his shield onto Tony’s mask again, and again, and again. He tore the broken metal from Tony’s face and sank his shield into Tony’s chest. The arc reactor split in half. The suit powered down, and then Stephen was left with nothing but the sound of Tony’s laboured breaths.

Tony coughed. Even with his eyes closed, Stephen could see the red droplets splatter onto the concrete. Tony tried to right himself, but his chest was injured and the suit was heavy. After several failed attempts, he collapsed. Stephen wanted to turn and face the outcome, but he couldn’t. He knew what was happening; he’d seen it so many times. So instead, Stephen buried his face in the snow. The sound of Tony’s coughs was heart-wrenching. Stephen clenched his teeth and wished for the nightmare to end.

“Hey wizard, get up! You have to fight!” Stephen’s eyes snapped open at a voice he hadn’t yet heard in his own timeline. The Cloak of Levitation was tugging on his back. Stephen crawled to his feet and took in the planet torn apart by war and poverty. He tasted dust every time he breathed in the orange-tinted atmosphere.

A man in a leather jacket landed in front of Stephen. He was wearing a silver helmet. He peered at Stephen through the helmet’s red, circular eye openings. “Are you alright?” he shouted above the noise. In the distance, four people were battling a colossus, purple-skinned Titan. The monster donned a golden gauntlet, above which shimmered four colourful gems. “Hey, are you injured?” When Stephen didn’t answer, the man retracted his helmet and asked again. His face was smeared with soot and blood.

No... Stephen took a step forward. He pushed past the man and raced toward the centre of the battlefield. Tony was easy to spot. He was holding the Mad Titan back with everything he had. Mark Sixty morphed into blades, canons, shields—every weapon that was coded into the suit’s system, but it wasn’t enough. With every strike, the nanoparticles diminished in numbers. The suit retracted to cover only Tony’s midsection, leaving his limbs exposed. Tony was running out of options, but then he saw an opening. He brought down the blade as fast as he could. It scratched the Mad Titans face and drew a single drop of blood. But instead of thwarting the Titan’s advance, the scratch angered him. He caught Tony’s arm and broke the blade clean off the suit. With the broken shard of metal, he pierced Tony’s chest. The tip of the blade cracked open the battle-worn suit. It split skin, flesh, and bones then came out the other side a nauseating red.

Time came to a halt. Tony opened his mouth and gasped for air. Blood trickled down his jaw. The hand that once clutched the Mad Titan’s arm fell to his side. “Why didn’t you save me?” Tony turned and looked Stephen in the eye. The people around them turned to dust. Colour faded from Tony’s features. His skin began to flake and crumble. “I trusted you to watch my back.”
Stephen held out his hand, but Tony was beyond his reach. The man before him closed his eyes. Stephen reached for the Eye of Agamotto, the Mind Stone—anything, but nothing was going to prolong the inevitable. Tony collapsed into a pile of dust. Wind swept away the grey flakes and sowed them across alien lands.

“You let me die.”

Stephen jerked awake.

The room was dark, and the blinds were still down. Stephen glanced at the clock on the wall. 12:39 a.m. He’d been asleep for an hour at most.

Stephen leaned over the side of the bed. His chest hurt as if his lungs had inflated and was grinding the rest of his organs together. Stephen stayed there for a while. When nothing came out, he slowly shifted his upper body back onto the mattress. Stephen leaned against the headboard and breathed in small, rapid bursts. Images from his dream came rushing back. The nightmares folded on top of each other. While each differed minutely, they all lead to the same outcome. He’d witnessed thousands of failed futures, thousands of futures where Tony…

Stephen looked to the other side of the bed. Tony was sleeping soundly beside him. Stephen dragged a hand down his face. The sheer frustration of watching Tony perish over and over again was too much for his brain to handle. It wreaked havoc on his otherwise stable mentality. The failed futures haunted him during the day and followed him deep into the night. There was nowhere to hide.

Stephen bit into his hand. The pain helped to clear his head. He inhaled deeply and let the air sit in his chest. Tony had seen through his odd behaviour prior to their trip to Asgard. Since then he’d been trying his best to convince Stephen to rest. Stephen didn’t have the heart to refuse him, but these days, it was getting increasingly difficult for him to catch any sleep at all.

As Stephen commanded his pounding heart to behave, he recalled the contents of his dream. Stephen was overwhelmed by a sense of disgust over his cowardly behaviour. He was better than that. It was far too early to give up. He would find a way to succeed. He had to.

A fanatic buzz tore through the silent penthouse. Out of reflex, Stephen banished the source of the noise to the Mirror Dimension. Tony hummed. The smaller man was stirring in his sleep. Stephen sank back into the sheets and murmured soft reassurances in Tony’s ear. After another minute of quietness, Tony stillled.

Stephen fetched his Sling Ring from beneath his pillow. He swung his arm in a wide arc, and a plane of reflective shards appeared in the air. Stephen’s mastery over magic had improved significantly over the years. He leaned forward, and his upper body crossed the crystalline threshold linking the real world to the Mirror Dimension. Time, space, and gravity functioned differently here. Any noise in the Mirror Dimension was muted from the outside world. Stephen found the object that was spinning due to the residual energy of having been tossed. It was a pair of
Tony’s aviators. He plucked it from the air. The glasses’ slender frame had been custom fitted with both Jarvis and a HUD. Tony kept a pair of those on the nightstand for emergencies.

“Dr. Strange, apologies for the disturbance. It’s Mr. Parker,” Jarvis said after Stephen donned the glasses.

Tony’s faithful AI played a short clip for Stephen to grasp the situation. After the display dimmed, Stephen took off the aviators and pinched the bridge of his nose. He left the Mirror Dimension, then sat motionless for a few seconds to catch his breath. He took another glance at the man fast asleep. The arc reactor rose and fell as Tony breathed. His eyelashes fluttered under the reactor’s glow, casting a small fan of shadow under his eyes. The smaller man was snugged inside a nest of soft quilts. His cheek pressed against his pillow.

Stephen smiled at the sight. He brushed a sleep-tousled lock from Tony’s forehead and planted a gentle kiss. He removed himself from the mattress, and with a wave of his hand, Stephen was dressed.

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I should’ve stayed home. Peter thought as the Extremis soldiers closed in. He’d backtracked until his back pressed against the entrance to the ship’s hold. Peter swallowed nervously. He needed to escape before they forced him into the ship. The Norco’s internal layout was a mystery and he fought better on open ground. Once he stepped foot into the hold, there was a strong possibility that he wouldn’t come back out.

“Nice and easy, spider boy,” Brandt said. She held up a pair of handcuffs and took another step forward. Who the hell carried around handcuffs with them anyway?

Peter searched his surroundings for anything that could help him. “Peter, behind her,” suit lady whispered into his ear. She highlighted an object on his HUD. It was red and cylindrical in shape.

“Thanks, I owe you one!” Peter shot a string of webs which missed Brandt by a long shot. Brandt crooked her head to the side, but before she could comment on Peter’s aim, Peter yanked the web and an object soared through the air. The fire extinguisher landed right where Peter wanted it. He pulled the safety pin free, aimed the black funnel at Brandt and started spraying. “Arson is against the law! Might wanna get yourself a new hobby!” White foam rained down on the flaming soldier. Brandt stumbled back, giving Peter just enough space to escape. He sprayed the remaining men too then abandoned the empty extinguisher.

From a distance, Peter webbed up the three individuals again, but this time with extra layers. The foam prevented them from sparking another fire, which protected the webs, though it was only a matter of time before they smeared off enough foam to reignite parts of their body. The men on patrol were visibly weaker, but Brandt was making short work of the webs. A tab on Peter’s HUD signalled that she was outputting twice as much heat as the others. Her limbs glowed amber under the thick layer of translucent webbing. Peter searched the deck for other items that would debilitate her. He found nothing.
Peter was at his wit’s end when a chunk of metal fell from the sky. It split into two smaller pieces and clamped Brandt’s arms and legs together. Two more sets of restraints followed, binding the men who had been on patrol. Peter took in the device’s unmistakable red and gold paint job. He was overwhelmed by a feeling of dread not even fighting enhanced criminals could surpass.

“It won’t happen again’, he said.” A voice sounded from behind Peter. He whipped around and saw a figure descend from the sky. “I’ll stay out of trouble’, he said.” Peter recognised that voice. The man whom it belonged to had baked him lasagne thirty hours ago.

Instead of the suit of armour he’d been expecting, Mr. Strange levitated down to eye level one inch at a time. The red cloak on his shoulders fluttered majestically in the seaside breeze. Mr. Strange was wearing an externalised HUD. Glow from the rolling statistics accentuated his angular features. The metallic material of his robes gave off a silver sheen beneath the moonlight. He was holding something in his hand.

Peter squinted. Was that a Venti Starbucks cup?

“How long have you been standing—I mean floating there, Mr. Strange?” Peter asked. Mr. Strange didn’t reply. He took one final swig from his late-night coffee and tossed the empty cup into a sparking portal. “You didn’t have to come all the way out here. I had it under control.”

“Young man, from our previous discussion, I thought we came to an understanding,” Mr. Strange said. He gestured to the chaos around them. The deck was on fire while three Extremis soldiers struggled against their restraints. “What you did tonight was both reckless and unnecessary. I hope you can grasp the magnitude of the risk you took, not only to endanger your own life, but also the lives of others.”

Peter lowered his gaze. Those words had doused his eagerness with the harsh truth of reality. Who was he kidding? He didn’t have that under control; he was seconds away from running out of options. Peter stared at the tip of his shoes and avoided looking Mr. Strange in the eyes. This wasn’t how the night was supposed to end. He’d wanted to help, but instead he made a big mess for everyone involved. Peter looked over his surroundings again and sulked. “I’m sorry, Mr. Strange. I went behind your back. This is my fault.”

Mr. Strange sighed. He closed his HUD with a tap on his earpiece. “You are under Tony’s guidance for a reason. It takes time to train and learn to handle this kind of situation.”

“Does Mr. Stark know?” Peter shifted uncomfortably. “How did you find me anyway? I removed…”

“Yes, you removed the tracker, an object specifically installed so backup could locate you.” Mr. Strange somehow managed to make Peter feel even worse. Silence weighed down the air between them. When Mr. Strange was satisfied that his words had sunk in, he continued with a snap of his fingers. “Remember those runes I traced?” On cue, glowing disks appeared on Peter’s chest. “They were drawn with an activation prerequisite. When you take a serious hit, they’ll appear and protect you until one of the Avengers arrive. In its dormant form, it functions similarly to a tracker. You also enabled your suit’s AI. She records everything you see. It’s called the Baby Monitor Protocol.”

“Of course it is,” Peter mumbled.

“You didn’t think we’d let you run lose by yourself, with no safety precautions?” Mr. Strange asked. Now that Peter thought about it, it did seem kind of dumb that he assumed he could outsmart both Mr. Stark and Mr. Strange. “To answer your other question, no, Tony doesn’t know
“Are you going to tell Mr. Stark?” Peter asked. He waited for the inevitable, but the confirmation never came.

“Peter,” Mr. Strange cleared his throat. “I…understand your need to prove yourself. I might have done things equally irresponsible before. However,” Mr. Strange emphasised as Peter looked up with refreshed hope, “that doesn’t excuse your actions tonight. You are most definitely still grounded.” Peter lowered his head again. He didn’t move until something blocked his light. Mr. Strange was an arm’s length away. There was something twinkling in his eyes, an emotion too complicated for Peter to grasp.

“Tony has such high hopes for you—”

“Rising heat signature detected!”

“Doc, it’s Brandt!”

Three voices sounded at once. Everything changed within a span of seconds. Peter was pushed through an amber portal. He saw Mr. Strange turn with widened eyes, and then the portal swished shut. Peter landed on his back. He sprung up and realised he was teleported two hundred metres from the Norco.

“What the—what happened?” Peter asked.

“Brandt’s body temperature rose to a dangerous level. You were transported here by Dr. Strange,” suit lady said.

Peter climbed on top of the nearest stack of containers to get a better view. His enhanced eyesight could barely make out the Norco in the darkness, but the magnifying option on his HUD did the trick. Brandt hadn’t escaped from her restraints, which was a relief. Though her entire body seemed to be crackling from the heat. She opened her mouth and roared. The stream of flames incinerated the deck and burned deep into the ship.

It missed Mr. Strange completely.

Peter couldn’t begin to grasp the situation. What was she doing? There was nothing there. Her attack had been aimed downwards. And then Peter remembered: the Norco was an oil tanker.

Mr. Strange noticed that right off the bat. He made a series of complicated hand gestures. A large circular shield appeared. It encased Mr. Strange, but it didn’t stop there. The shield continued to expand until it wrapped the entire ship within an orange sphere. For a few seconds, nothing happened.

And then the Norco exploded.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Tony touched down on the landing strip. Mark Sixty retracted into the arc reactor as he walked. The silver nanoparticles spurred a cold sensation as they flowed down his body, but nothing could thwart the fire that burned inside his chest. Tony had woken to a distress signal and an empty bed. According to Jarvis, an oil tanker had exploded at the docks. Naturally, his partner and his mentee had been right in the middle of the action when the tanker went up in flames.

Tony pushed open the glass doors leading to the penthouse. The building’s transparent facade sealed off the crisp night wind. For once, Stark Tower’s cutting-edge climate control worked against its creator. With nothing to thwart it, the fire burned brighter with every step Tony took until it became an all-consuming inferno. Tony kept walking until he reached the young man on the couch. “Previously on Peter screws the pooch, I told you to stay away from this. Instead, you hacked a multimillion-dollar suit, so you could sneak around behind my back, doing the one thing I told you not to do.”

Peter’s head sank impossibly lower. “Was everyone okay?”

“No thanks to you,” Tony said.

“Tony…” Stephen spoke from the lounge chair. He’d changed out of his burnt sorcerer robes as Tony liaised with the authorities. Stephen cradled his head gingerly with an ice pack. He’d hit it on something during the explosion. “Given the circumstances, I don’t think—”

Tony levelled Stephen with a menacing glare. Stephen dropped the subject. Tony took another deep breath and returned his attention to Peter. “If Stephen hadn’t been there, you would’ve been toast. Did you know I was the only one who believed in you? Everyone else said I was crazy to recruit a fourteen-year-old kid.”

“I’m fifteen,” Peter mumbled.

“No, this is where you zip it! The adult is talking,” Tony snapped. Peter sprung from his seat. He backtracked as Tony neared, looking legitimately terrified. Tony couldn’t believe his mentee’s dumb luck. Lucky for everyone involved, Stephen’s quick reflexes had sealed the tanker in a spherical shield before the oil ignited. The explosion tore through the shield, but the mystical energy had been enough to subdue it, and the blast hadn’t reached the docks. Stephen made a second smaller shield to protect himself while the Extremis users perished. Tony shuddered at the implication. If one of those shields hadn’t formed in time…

“What if a civilian had died tonight?” Tony continued. He backed Peter up against the wall. “Different story, right? Cause that’s on you.” “Tony tapped the spider symbol on Peter’s chest. The plastic was cool to the touch. The inconspicuous symbol could transform into a mini-drone when the need arose. The drone could spy on enemies, keep tabs on targets… Tony knew. He knew
everything he’d programmed into Peter’s suit. “And if you died…I feel like that’s on me. I don’t need that on my conscience.”

“Yes, Sir,” Peter croaked.

“Yes.” Tony rolled his hand for Peter to elaborate.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it.”

“I just…I just wanted to be like you.” Peter finally lifted his gaze. The light in those eyes was too much for Tony to bear. Tony knew Peter looked up to him. That was why he’d been so careful. He wanted to set a good example for Peter. He had such high hopes for him.

“And I wanted you to be better,” Tony said. The penthouse fell silent at the revelation. Peter lowered his head again, and the remaining embers of the fire that has been burning in Tony’s chest extinguished. Tony shifted his gaze and took in the view that was outside the penthouse’s panoramic window. That was the world they fought so hard to protect. That was what was at stake should one of them make a mistake. At this hour, New York City was as quiet as it’d ever be. The haze of the night draped over the metropolis, muting the traffic and dimming the pillars of light. It wouldn’t be dawn for another couple of hours.

“Okay, it’s not working out. I’m gonna need the suit back,” Tony said.

“For how long?” Peter asked.

“Forever.”

“No…no, no—” Peter shook his head as he clutched the suit close to his chest.

“Yeah, that’s how it works. Let’s have it.” Tony looked away from the kid. He felt like such a jerk, but it was for the best. Peter wasn’t ready. He’d given the kid more responsibility than he could handle. He never should’ve taken Peter to Leipzig and he never should’ve agreed to mentor him.

“Please, please, please…you don’t understand. This is all I have. I’m nothing without this suit.”

Tony’s head snapped back up. “If you are nothing without this suit, then you shouldn’t have it.” The weight of the words hung heavy between them. What was he without the suit? Once upon a time, Tony had deflected that question with sarcasm and humour. He now understood the importance behind it. Technology, biological enhancements, some freak accident…none of those things made a hero.

Tony and Peter regarded each other with mutual strain. “Okay? God, I sound like my dad.” Tony had been the first to break the tension. He hated the parallel. Howard had been nothing but cold and calculating when he was still alive, and pompous and vague with his recorded messages after he’d passed. And if he was comparing himself to Howard… Tony swallowed the lump in his throat and gestured to the suit again.

Peter pursed his lips. “I don’t have any other clothes…” he said after he realised Tony was dead serious.

“Okay, we’ll sort that out.” Tony instructed the bots to fetch a set of tracksuits for Peter. Peter changed into them reluctantly. With quickened breath, he held up the suit he’d vacated and opened his mouth. Tony knew what the kid was about to say. He doubted he could follow through with his
punishment if he heard another heartrending plea, so he turned on his heels.

Tony walked to the opposite end of the lounge and stood there with his back to the room. He heard Peter clamp his jaw shut. He could feel Peter’s gaze on the back of his head. The quiet penthouse amplified the jitter in his stomach, but Tony clenched his fists and stood his ground. He heard the ruffle of fabric, and after another minute, the soft chime of the elevator.

Tony turned. Peter was gone. On the coffee table laid a neatly folded red and blue suit.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again and nothing had changed, he doubled back to pick up the suit. The bundle of material seemed soulless without the boy in it. Tony tossed it onto the couch’s backrest and sat. He covered his face with his hands, which was a bad move, because as soon as his vision darkened, thoughts began to blare in his head.

He had been so responsible before he met you.

You were supposed to guide him.

You let him down.

There was a dip in the couch cushion. Tony was pulled into a warm embrace. He rested his head on Stephen’s shoulder as Stephen ran a hand through his hair. Stephen hadn’t said a word since Tony rejected his input, choosing to observe the turn of events instead. “He wanted to impress you,” Stephen said after Tony had relaxed. “He wanted to join the team, and he thought the only way to do that was to accomplish something amazing. To beginners, your achievements seem insurmountable.”

“That’s precisely why I can’t let him join.” Tony’s response was muffled by Stephen’s shirt. “The world remembers what we did for it, but it also remembers our mistakes. Ultron will stick with me for the rest of my life. Peter…he’s just a kid. I want it to be better for him. Maybe in another ten years he’ll understand. Hell, I didn’t get it until someone shoved a photo of their dead son in my face. Did you think I was too harsh?”

“No.” Stephen was quick to respond. He seemed to have the answer lined up. “But I do think you two should have another conversation. Don’t let it end like this.”

Tony soaked up Stephen’s presence and nodded. “You would’ve been so much better at this.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Stephen’s clear-cut response surprised Tony. “Do you know why? Because Peter thinks you are the best superhero out there, and the best there’ll ever be. Most people lock up the criminals and go home, but you are there for the aftermath. You make life easier for the average citizen when there isn’t a fight to be won, and in the long run, that’s more important. Peter couldn’t have chosen a better role model.”

“I’m not that great…”

Stephen’s raised brows suggested he’d never heard another sillier statement. “You see your mistakes. Peter sees your accomplishments.”

“What about you? What do you see? No embellishments. Just give it to me straight.”

Stephen took some time to formulate his response. “I see both.”

“Yeah? What do you think?” Tony’s heart rate kicked up a notch in the ensuing silence.
Stephen heaved a gentle sigh. He dropped the icepack he’d been carrying and slid down until his head was propped on Tony’s lap. “Before I fell in love with you, I respected you. Stop doubting yourself.”

“And people say I’m the smooth talker.” Tony’s heart was flooded by something warm and fuzzy. He examined the patch of bruised skin Stephen had been nursing. “You should’ve woken me.”

“I handled it.”

“Yeah, handled it. I mean, huge ass explosion, incinerated bad guys, hundreds of thousands in collateral damage… You ‘handled it’ alright.”

“I wanted you to get a good night’s sleep,” Stephen murmured.

“Yeah, I know.” Tony’s gaze softened. The skin on Stephen’s forehead hadn’t split, so Tony rubbed some ointment onto it and left the swelling alone to let it air out. “Jarvis is combing through surveillance footage as we speak. They’ve gone into hiding, but we’ll find them.” As disastrous as Peter’s late-night escapade had been, it did bring an important issue to Tony’s attention. He hadn’t seen or heard from the members of the original A.I.M. since the merge. Tony had thought they moved on with their lives, but as it turned out, they had been biding time for all these years.

“Hmm…” Stephen hummed. His eyelids were drooping close.

“Let’s get you to bed, old man,” Tony said. Stephen had been through enough in one night. The conversation could wait until tomorrow.

Speaking of tomorrow…Tony rolled his eyes as he remembered the paperwork he had to sort through for Stark Expo 2016. The opening ceremony was scheduled for the end of the week. Pepper, bless that woman, had smoothed out any and all legal issues, but there were still many hiccups on the technical side Tony had to fix himself. The expo was going to be a technological wonder. He couldn’t afford to skimp on prep.

Tony wiggled his legs out from beneath Stephen’s head and offered his hand. “Yeah, I could use a few hours,” Stephen said. Enduring an oil tanker explosion was no small feat. Stephen must be sore all over. He stood up with Tony’s help and cracked his back. “Promise me you’ll talk to Peter after you’ve both cooled down?”

“Promise,” Tony smiled. Stephen rarely repeated himself. It seemed that Tony wasn’t the only one who took a liking to Peter. He’d be talking to his misbehaving mentee again, but for the time being, it was better for the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man if he stayed close to the ground.

Peter dragged his feet down the carpeted hallway. It was early, but many of the apartment’s working occupants were out and about. Peter felt out of place in the expensive outfit that clearly wasn’t meant for him or his surroundings. Mr. Stark’s shoes were a size too big, and the outfit’s orange and black colouring stood out like a sore thumb. Though thankfully, the tracksuit had come
with a vacuum seal option. It clung to him like a second layer of skin. Peter had a fleeting suspicion the garment was designed for something drearier than a Sunday jog. He’d taken a taxi back home, courtesy of Jarvis. The vehicle had sped up his journey, but if Peter was to be honest, he’d been kind of hoping an alien spaceship would show up and abduct him, so he didn’t have to face what was on the other side of his front door.

Peter knocked on the entrance of his family apartment. Aunt May opened it on the second knock. “Hey,” Peter bleated. Aunt May looked at him and shook her head. She turned on her heels. Peter followed her into the lounge and saw Uncle Ben sitting in the old armchair near the window. Neither him nor May had gone to work. Ned had left for school. He’d texted Peter last night and told him they were busted, but Peter hadn’t seen the text until dusk. There had also been thirty-one missed calls.

“I’ve been calling you all night. You didn’t answer your phone. You can’t do that. Then this explosion thing happens down at the docks. I’ve called five police stations. Five,” Aunt May began.

“I’m fine, May, I’m okay,” Peter said.

“I called five of your friends. I called Ned’s mother—”

“Honestly, just relax, I’m fine.”

“Cut the bullshit,” Aunt May snapped. Her dishevelled hair flew in a wide arc as she whipped around to confront Peter. “Don’t you think you’ve slipped under the radar for all this time. I know you quit band. I know you’ve been cutting class. I know you sneak out of this house every night. That’s not fine. Peter, you have to tell me what’s going on. Just lay it out. It’s just you, me, and Ben.” Aunt May gestured to the room’s occupants.

Peter’s gaze shifted to Uncle Ben. The older man gave Peter one of those understanding looks that never failed to reassure him. Peter looked back to Aunt May. Her eyes were bright with fury, but beneath them, there was a layer of unsuppressed worry. Peter recalled Mr. Stark’s disappointed words.

He’d let everyone down.

The night’s events caught up to Peter at long last. His body was tired, but his mental exhaustion by far outweighed the physical. He’d tried his best, but it wasn’t enough. “I lost the Stark Internship,” Peter whispered as a stifling feeling bloomed in his chest.

“What?” Aunt May asked. Though it had been more of a gasp than a question.

“Yeah,” Peter’s eyes reddened. He chewed on his bottom lip and fiddled with the hem of the unfamiliar tracksuit. Their old clock ticked away on the wall. The sound had never been so loud.

“What happened?” Aunt May’s voice took a gentler turn.

What happened? Peter had asked himself that same question. “I just thought that I could work really hard, and he could—he would—you know.” Peter bit back the tears and sat. “But, I screwed it up.”

“Oh…” Aunt May pulled him into a hug. “It’s okay. Everything’s okay…”

“I’m sorry I made you worry.” Peter said.
Aunt May only pulled him closer. “You know I’m not trying to ruin your life.”

“Yeah, I know.” Peter returned the hug. His aunt’s embrace was as warm and comforting as they came. It had been something he always associated with safety. The churning gears in Peter’s mind slowed down. He sat there and breathed in the scent of his surroundings. Peter picked up the smell of baked oatmeal cookies, leather shoe polish, and a whiff of cooking grease their run-down exhaust fan couldn’t quite remove. After a long night of uncertainties, he was finally home.

“Are you going to be okay?” Aunt May asked as she let go, and in that moment, with his aunt and uncle’s undivided attention on him, Peter came to realise just how close he’d gotten to never seeing them again. For the first time since he began masquerading as the vigilante Spider-Man, Peter felt a foreboding sense of fear.

“Thanks May, I’m fine.” Peter wished he’d believe his own words.

“Alright…” Aunt May didn’t sound convinced. “Look, honey, I’ve got to go to work. I’m already running late, but why don’t you take the day off? Use it to clear your head. And go take a shower while you’re at it. You smell like…burnt garbage.” Aunt May wrinkled her nose. She began to walk back to her room but paused when she reached the end of the hallway. Talk to him. Aunt May mouthed to Uncle Ben. She pointed at Peter where she thought Peter couldn’t see her. After Uncle Ben nodded, she disappeared down the hall. Peter had been too upset to comment on the chain of events. He continued to sulk until someone joined him.

Uncle Ben had brought a chair from their dining table. He placed the chair beside Peter’s and cleared his throat. When Peter didn’t respond, he crossed his legs and waited. Eventually, the raw bundle of emotions in Peter’s chest subsided, and he was able to focus on the situation at hand.

“I’m sorry,” Peter said to his uncle.

“You apologised to May, so consider yourself forgiven, young man,” Uncle Ben said. Peter let out a lopsided smile. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and straightened his back. “You know Peter, you’re changing; I get that. I mean, when I was your age, I went through the exact same thing.”

“Uhm—maybe not exactly the same.”

“Alright, maybe not,” His uncle chuckled. “You kids nowadays, with your fancy technology, and your Stark phones—but my point is…” Uncle Ben uncrossed his legs and leaned forward until his elbows rested on his knees. “Peter, these are the years when a man changes into the man he’s going to be for the rest of his life. You are going to make a lot of important choices in the coming years. Maybe you’ve made some already. They’ll affect you, for better, or for worse.”

Peter stared at the hem of the tracksuit. The feather-light fabric felt so much heavier. “I didn’t mean to make you worry. I didn’t mean to make May worry. I didn’t mean to disappoint Mr. Stark —”

“I know, you are a good kid,” Uncle Ben reassured Peter, “but sometimes good people can do dumb things. Whatever it was you wanted to do, you probably thought you were ready. As it turned out, you weren’t. Now that’s okay, because we learn through our mistakes, but one day you’ll have duties of your own, and that’s when everything changes.” Uncle Ben gestured to the photo of him, Aunt May, and Peter on the wall.

Peter took in his uncle’s solemn expression and nodded. Responsibility, accountability, and consent; Peter thought back to The Avengers Official Code of Conduct that had generated such widespread approval.
“Think very carefully before you act. You might not be able to take those actions back. Everything we do affects the people around us.” The older man gave Peter a pat on the shoulder.

“Remember, with great power, comes great responsibility.”

Chapter End Notes

You tell him, Uncle Ben!

I've sprinkled a couple of clues in the past chapters. The Homecoming arc is about to enter its juicy third act! :D

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had taken Peter great effort to sit through school the following day. Ned had bombarded him with questions, the day had been jammed packed with his least favourite subjects, and he’d gotten called to the principal’s office for his falling grades. Detention had been the most mind-numbing thing in existence. Peter sighed as he dumped his backpack onto the floor of his room. He sank into his chair, propped his feet up on the table, and swivelled left and right as he used the table for leverage.

The apartment was eerily quiet. It was a Friday afternoon. His aunt and uncle were out for work. Nothing but the occasional squeak of his chair echoed through the air. Peter lowered his feet and retrieved his bag. Nope. He refused to mope. He was Spider-Man at heart, and Spider-Man didn’t mope.

Peter laid out the day’s homework on his desk. He powered through them and didn’t glace up until they were done and dusted. It had been a while since he concentrated on something as mundane as homework. It felt good to know at least one aspect of his life was falling in line. Peter packed the filled booklets away and sank back into his chair. Alright, now what? He stared at the clock on the wall. It was only 7:15 p.m.

At this hour, Peter would usually be swinging about in the city. With his vigilante persona bound to metaphorical house arrest, he was at a loss of what to do. Peter tried to suppress the urge to check his phone. He’d downloaded an app that fed him real-time crime updates. Peter cleared his throat and thought of distractions, like potato chips and what he was going to do for homecoming, but his phone was just sitting there…conveniently within reach. The screen’s reflective display looked like there was a notification. Peter snatched his phone and unlocked it. Strange, perhaps he’d misread, his notification feed was stagnant.

“Hi, Peter.” Peter jumped at the cheery voice.

“What the—suit—suit lady?” Peter asked as he held the phone close to his face. “Why are you here? How did you get into my phone?” The screen of Peter’s phone had turned pitch black. A thin blue line appeared and sliced the rectangular display in half. It fluctuated to indicate the wavelength of suit-lady’s voice.

“I hacked into it,” the cheery voice explained. “According to Doctor Strange, nearly dying, being scolded by your mentor, then losing your suit all at once might be too much for a fledging hero to handle. After a morning of discussions, Doctor Strange has chosen me as a delegate to help you through this period of transition. You are, of course, still grounded. But look on the bright side, at least I can help you with homework.”

“Oh, come on, I don’t need help with homework…” Peter dropped to the floor and spread out his arms and legs. He stared at the ceiling. The paint was flaking in the corners and there were
footprints all over it. He should probably clean that. “Hey suit lady, I kinda feel bad calling you ‘suit lady’, you know? Do you have a name?”

“No. I had been hoping you would name me.”

“Oh? You don’t have a name, like Jarvis or Friday?”

“As your companion AI, Mr. Stark had thought it was best to leave the naming to you. He programmed my personality matrix and left it at that. I am still learning, much like yourself.”

“Well, you are doing a great job.” Peter sighed. Unlike myself, he mentally added. “You are also super nice, like Liz. No, no, no—calling you Liz would be creepy. What about…Karen?”

“You can call me Karen, if you would like.”

“Alright, Karen it is…” Peter let the last of his words trail off. He continued to stare at the ceiling until he recalled the last time he’d spoken with the AI of not-his suit. “Karen… I really messed up this time, didn’t I?”

“Some would say that,” Karen said hesitantly.

“Well… what do you think?”

“I think you are learning.” Minus the all-encompassing glee, Karen’s voice sounded surprisingly reassuring. “It’s not easy to be a superhero, and unlike standardised education, there are no courses to teach you. You should have listened to your mentor. He is there to guide you, but…”

“But?” Peter echoed the mixed response.

“Sometimes you have to think for yourself. Your mentor won’t be there to guide you forever. Mr. Stark had designed the Training Wheels Protocol so that one day, you wouldn’t need him.”

Peter pursed his lips. “He said that?”

“No, but at times actions are a more accurate reflection of a person’s thoughts.”

Peter flipped onto his belly and squished his forearms under his chin. “Don’t be ridiculous. I can bust bank robberies all day long, but when a sky-beam appears, we’re gonna need the Avengers. Like, the real deal, such as Mr. Stark, Mr. Strange, the Hulk, Thor…”

“Why can’t you save the city?”

“I can, but what if the people are expecting someone like Iron Man? I mean, can you imagine how disappointed they’d be when they see me?”

“Well, if it was me, I wouldn’t be disappointed at all.”

“Thanks Karen.” Peter smiled. She probably said that to make him feel better, but Peter appreciated it. “It’s really nice to have someone to talk to. How long have we been talking anyway?”

“Nine minutes.”

“What?” Peter jumped up. She couldn’t be serious. He punched air a couple of times and did a set of ab crunches with his feet stuck to the roof. “Oh man, I can’t take this anymore.” Peter dropped from the ceiling. He threw himself onto the chair and ripped a piece of paper from his notebook.
“Karen, we’re gonna try figure out where the flaming people went and tell Mr. Stark. I can do this, right?”

“There are no protocols in place to prevent research,” Karen said.

“Great, I can only remember a couple of names.” Peter jotted down everything he could recall.

“Would you like me to replay the footage of that encounter?” The soundwave displayed on Peter’s phone miniaturised into a tiny window on the top left-hand corner. The rest of the screen was taken up by a string of recordings organised by timestamps.

“Stupid Baby Monitor Protocol…um, yeah, just roll it back to Wednesday.” The string of recordings rewound until minutes before he arrived at Red Hook Terminal. Peter watched himself swing past the containers and land on top of the red, white, and blue crane.

“Why is their secret layer in a ship? That’s so lame.” In the recording, he sprung from the loading arm and snuck to the top of the control room undetected. Karen activated enhanced reconnaissance mode. Peter observed the conversation between the guards again.

“I don’t know why Savin keeps us up here. It’s been five years since boss was killed. Stark’s forgotten all about us,” one of the guards said.

“Hold up, pause for a second. We have another name. Who’s Savin?” Peter asked.

“Eric Savin, former Lieutenant Colonel of the United States Armed Forces, and the right-hand man of Aldrich Killian. He was the person whom Killian had left the Norco to,” Karen said. The file of a man with buzz-cut hair and sharp eyes sprung up. Peter was overwhelmed by a sense of unease. He didn’t like the way that man looked, something about the glint in his eyes set off Peter’s Spidey sense.

“Hmm…alright. Let’s say he’s the boss, but he wasn’t at their secret lair. We were fighting for a while and only encountered four people. That’s kinda weird,” Peter said.

“That’s highly unusual,” Karen agreed. “Before the merge, A.I.M. had accumulated over one hundred test subjects. If even a fraction of them had stayed, the numbers would still exceed a single digit. Perhaps they had gone out that night?”

“Let’s keep playing,” Peter said. Karen miniaturised Savin’s file and resumed the recording.

“Doesn’t hurt to be careful after those idiots caused a scene yesterday. Lucky none of the enhanced went with them. We need to lay low. Two more days and we’ll get our revenge,” another guard said.

“Wow, they are plotting something. I could catch them all red-handed. This is awesome.” Peter heard himself whisper. He knew what happened next. Like an idiot, he’d blundered into the depth of a terrorist organisation with a suit he wasn’t familiar with. He had to be rescued by Mr. Strange, and while Mr. Strange had been distracted, Brandt set the ship on fire, causing hundreds of thousands in collateral damage and injuring Mr. Strange in the process. Peter sighed. If he was Mr. Stark, he’d be pissed too.

“It seemed like the remnants of A.I.M. has a vendetta against Mr. Stark,” Karen said.

“Let’s replay that part?” Peter slurred as he chewed on the butt of his pencil.

“We need to lay low. Two more days and we’ll get our revenge.”
“Two more days…that’s—that’s today.” Peter dropped the pencil. “Karen, what’s happening today?”

“Searching events that concern Tony Stark, Iron Man, and Stark Industries…Peter…” Karen’s hesitation raised a red flag.

Peter swallowed nervously. “Yeah?”

“Stark Expo 2016’s grand opening happens tonight.”

“What?” Peter sprung from his seat and raced to his nightstand. He retrieved the tickets Mr. Stark had given him. On the pristine rectangles coated with metallic paint printed the date ‘Saturday 30th July 2016’. “But this is for tomorrow.”

“Yes, Peter. That’s for opening day, when the first full day of activities will commence. Mr. Stark likely gave you those tickets so you could enjoy the Expo with your aunt and uncle. Opening night is happening right now. The Expo began accepting guests at six o’clock. That was one and a half hours ago.”

“Has anything happened yet? Has—has anyone died?”

“No. The event is progressing smoothly, however…” Karen miniaturised the recording and brought up the Expo’s opening night schedule. She highlighted an attraction in red. “Mr. Stark will be giving a presentation in the main hall at eight o’clock. He will likely be joined by leading companies from the technology sector, as well as hundreds of civilians. We have twenty-seven minutes counting down from now.”

“Shit, shit shit—we have to warn Mr. Stark. Karen, you’ve got to call him.” Peter ground his teeth together as he waited for Karen to try Mr. Stark, Mr. Strange, and then Happy to no avail.

“They are likely preoccupied with entertaining guests and finalising security measures,” Karen said.

“What about Jarvis? What about Friday?” Peter asked.

“Due to the suit’s unorthodox activation, I have not been connected to the Avengers’ commlink. Jarvis and Friday are years to decades my senior. I cannot hack them. Any unauthorised attempts to connect will be treated as a security breach,” Karen said.

Peter sat on his bed and dragged his hands down his face. He could be wrong. The Extremis soldiers could have been planning something else. Mr. Stark might have caught them already, and even if he hadn’t there must be security measures in place to do so. Peter was on thin ice with Mr. Stark as it was. He didn’t have a proper suit. He didn’t have a way to combat the heat of Extremis. He could just stay home and see how things turn out.

He should stay home.

Peter closed his eyes. He clenched both of his hands into a fist and pressed it against his pounding heart. But what if something bad happened? Stark Expo 2016 was one of the most anticipated events of the year. Visitors flock there in the thousands. What if he had the power to stop a disaster from happening, but didn’t?

With great power, comes great responsibility.

Peter opened his eyes. He marched over to his closet and pulled out a dusty cardboard box. Inside it
Stark Expo 2016 was a phenomenon. The sprawling exhibition occupied every available surface of the twenty hectares showground in Flushing, New York. Leading technological companies from around the world gathered here. They filled the pavilions to the brim. Cutting-edge gaming technology, home entertainment, not-yet-released automobiles...the Expo showcased some of the most advanced gadgets available to the public. Colourful lights and squeals of uncontained glee dominated the atmosphere. A two-storey tall sculpture of Earth stood as the centrepiece of the exhibition. Rows of programmed fountains shot jets of water into the air. The pool stretched the length of the expo and guided visitors from the entrance to the main hall.

Having developed quite the reputation over the years, Stark Expo 2016 was bigger and better than it’d ever been. Visitors swarmed through the gates, and as the night progressed, the once spacious showground became increasingly crowded. Given the amount of manpower that had been dedicated to the Expo’s preparation and maintenance, the showground was in a state of orderly chaos.

Stephen placed his empty champagne flute on the tray of a passing waiter. He was in a waiting room with restricted access. Socialites, business tycoons, Hollywood actors, think-tank’s searching for angle investors… Anyone worth acquainting at the Expo gathered in the waiting room to talk business.

Currently, chatter in the room was lukewarm, but the night was young. Stephen knew what the people were were waiting for: the main attraction, both metaphorically and physically. “How’s it going?” Stephen asked as he distanced himself from the crowd.

“Smoother than triple distilled whisky.” Tony’s voice rang through his earpiece. “ETA twenty minutes.”

“Try not to get clipped by the fireworks this time.” Stephen sighed.

“No promises, you know I like to tango with fire.”

Stephen ended the call with a smile. A convener was ushering people to the main hall. Stephen slowly filtered out of the room with the rest of the crowd. He approached his spot in the VIP booth. Tony had saved him the best seat in the house. At his vantage point, Stephen could not only see the stage, but also the roaring mass beneath. People had begun to line up for Tony’s presentation as soon as the doors opened. The presentation was a ticketed event, but those who arrived first had the best chance at seeing Iron Man up close. Stephen’s gaze lingered on the people who’d come dressed in red and gold armour.

That was Tony’s legacy. Iron Man was the Protector of Earth. He’d saved thousands of lives and inspired hundreds of thousands more. Donning a costume and fighting crime had once been a silly thing to do, but more people were joining the Avengers than ever before. Street-level heroes had begun to pop up over the years. While they might be a long way from fighting extra-terrestrial
threats, they were efficient at keeping their neighbourhoods safe. The world was entering a new age it’d never seen before: an age of heroes.

The roof of the main hall parted. Bursts of fireworks lit up the night sky. In the blink of an eye, a man landed centre stage in his iconic three-point crouch. The crowd went wild. People from the VIP booth stood to get a better view. Stephen couldn’t hide his smirk. His heart was filled with pride for his partner. Tony had a magnetic presence. Before Stephen knew Tony for who he was, that was what had attracted him.

On stage, Mark Sixty retracted into the arc reactor. During battle, the suit could deploy within a fraction of a second, but tonight Tony had been content to let the suit slowly glide back. The tinted external shell had been the first to dissolve. It exposed an intricate network of silver alloys, which then melted away too. The crowd erupted into a frenzy. Tony winked at his screaming fans as Mark Sixty disappeared and revealed an immaculately pressed velvet three-piece. The dark blue jacket had been trimmed with black to match Tony’s bowtie. Tony looked stunning, if Stephen said so himself.

“Ah, it’s good to be back!” Tony said. He held a hand up to his ear. “Let’s hear it. I know you missed me.” Applause drowned out the second half of Tony’s sentence. Stephen sank into the upholstered seat and declined the waiter who’d returned to serve a second round of drinks. He listened as Tony delivered a captivating speech. A beep in his earpiece caught Stephen’s attention.

“Doc, Extremis heat signatures detected at Stark Tower. Iron Sentries have been deployed to contain the situation,” Friday said. Stephen looked around him. The closest people were within earshot. Stephen fished out his phone and typed: How many?

“How many?”

“Thirty. Two of the Sentries went down as we speak. This appears to be their remaining forces. They waited until boss began the presentation to strike,” Friday said.

A surge of annoyance crept up Stephen’s chest. Having seen Tony’s day-to-day activities for the past year, Stephen knew how much time Tony had spent preparing for the Expo. The first Stark Expo of the new millennium was one of Tony’s biggest regrets. Granted that Tony had done everything he could do to salvage the situation, he still thought he’d rushed the job and botched his father’s reputation. Tony had drawn out the prep period for this year so everything would run as smoothly as possible. Stephen wasn’t going to let a handful of matchsticks ruin the exhibition Tony had worked so hard for.

Stephen stood and apologised for his sudden departure. With a stiff smile, he squeezed past the people sitting in the same row as him and left the VIP booth. On stage, the presentation had entered the customary montage of Howard Stark. Tony briefly left the stage to let the video play.

“How many?”

“Honey, did you get that?” Tony’s voice rang through the earpiece.

“I’ll take care of it,” Stephen said. With a wave of his hands, his black tuxedo morphed into a set of sorcerer robes. Stephen snuck into an empty room and drew a portal to Stark Tower. The cloak flew to him as soon as his foot crossed the ring of sparks.

Stephen chose to portal to the foot of the tower. A dozen Iron Sentries sealed off the scene while the rest combated the intruders. Majority of the Extremis soldiers were engaged in battle. They protected three skilled users who concentrated on melting the building’s structural columns.

Stephen regarded the soldiers with narrowed eyes. “You are trespassing on private property,” Stephen said as he tapped his right fist on his left palm. Two glowing mandalas appeared.
“Remove yourself from these premises, or you will be removed.”

Chapter End Notes

Bonus points to anyone who can guess A.I.M.'s evil scheme. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
By the time Peter got to the Expo, Mr. Stark’s presentation had already begun. “Excuse me! Coming through! Watch your head!” Peter called as he swung past a group of pedestrians. He’d snuck in by flipping over the fence. His ticket was for tomorrow, but he didn’t have time to wait in the winding line. So far, few people had paid him attention. They’d assumed he was a part of the Expo, for which Peter was thankful.

Peter landed near the sculpture of the Earth. There weren’t many trees in this sector of the showground and the pavilions were single-storey. He’d have to make the rest of the journey by foot. Any space around him was quickly filled with guests. Peter stood on his tiptoes and tried to gaze into the distance. His height was average for his age; half the adults in the vicinity blocked his view. As Peter pushed toward the main hall, it became increasingly difficult for him to advance. He bumped into people from every direction. The high-pitched shrieks of children hurt his ears.

Peter stopped by a lamp post to catch his breath. Had his mask always been this hard to see in?

“Karen, there are too many visitors. We won’t make it in time!”

“Mr. Stark’s presentation will last another thirty minutes. If you maintain your current speed, we will arrive in time for the finale,” Karen said from the earbuds that had been taped to Peter’s mask. Having Karen mutter instructions on speaker was a terrible idea, so Peter utilised the tools at his disposal. He’d threaded the cord under his shirt to avoid it getting caught. His homemade suit had been modified from a hoodie, which came with pockets that his phone currently occupied.

Peter knew he looked ridiculous, but hey, not everyone could save the day in style.

“What if they strike before then?” Peter panted. He’d swung to the Expo all the way from his apartment. Luckily the showground had been in Queens, but he was feeling the workout.

“Mr. Stark is on stage. He won’t get our message until it’s too late. Any word from Mr. Strange or Happy?”

“No. Aside from sending a fifty-word summary of the situation through text, I’ve been calling nonstop. Dr. Strange has rerouted his calls straight to voicemail, whereas Happy has switched off his phone,” Karen said.

“We need to get a move on!” Peter pushed off the pole and merged back into the crowd. “Mr. Stark won’t have his suit. If A.I.M. tries anything he’ll be completely exposed!”

“Actually, he does,” Karen said. “The arc reactor has been fused back into his chest for this very purpose. Mark Sixty has a reaction time of zero point six seconds. In the event of an attack, Jarvis will automatically deploy the suit. It’s the civilians you should be worried about.”

“What?” Peter stopped dead in his tracks. A man walked into him. Peter apologised and hunched his shoulders to take up as little space as possible. The man shook his head at Peter and walked
around him. “But…if A.I.M. no longer has the element of surprise, they’ll get their asses kicked,” Peter whispered.

“Perhaps they planned a suicide mission?”

“No. These people hate Mr. Stark. They’ll want to strike where it hurts.” Peter was nudged to the side by a large family. He held up his arms and tried to avoid elbowing the little kids with Iron Man balloons.

And then it came to Peter.

Kids. Legacy. Accountability…

“Karen, what is the place in the Expo A.I.M. can hit to cause maximum civilian casualties?” Peter asked.

“Analysing…” Karen said. Peter took out his phone. An axonometric view of the Expo appeared. Karen highlighted a building in red, “The power plant. An arc reactor has been installed there to provide the Expo with renewable energy. Stark Expo 2016 is fully self-sufficient and does not rely on electricity from the grid. If A.I.M. were to overload the reactor and detonate it, the resulting blast would wipe out the entire northern sector, killing thousands.”

“That’s where they’re headed!” Peter followed the route Karen had plotted and pushed out of the crowd. The answer was so obvious, Peter mentally kicked himself for not seeing it sooner. “A.I.M. knew they couldn’t beat Mr. Stark. They never wanted to attack where he was, they wanted to attack where he wasn’t. If thousands of people died while attending the Expo, Mr. Stark would never forgive himself.”

As Peter ran from the main attractions, the visitors thinned until he was the only one left in the vicinity. The Expo’s back-of-house was masked by lush foliage. Peter sighed a breath of relief and shot a web at a tree. He swung forward. Being able to move normally again shortened his travel time by half.

The power plant was tucked away neatly in the showground’s north-eastern corner. The area was attraction-free and fenced off to ensure no civilians accidentally stumbled across it. Peter hopped past the barbwire fence. For a place so important, the power plant was strangely unmanned. Peter knew something was wrong when he saw two bodies strewn across the walkway. With quickened breaths, Peter closed in to investigate. Both men’s jumpsuits had Stark Expo 2016 stitched on the breast pocket. They were armed too, perhaps a part of the security team. Blood oozed from the gunshot wound on their foreheads. Under the pale moonlight, the sticky liquid coloured the pavement black.

“Be careful, Peter. Many of the original test subjects were a part of the United States Armed Forces. They are trained in combat and have likely spent these past years experimenting with Extremis,” Karen warned. “Your current outfit is not bullet or shock proof. The cotton-nylon blend is also highly flammable.”

Peter swallowed loudly. He stared at the hole on the men’s heads.

“It’s not too late to turn back,” Karen added.

But thousands of lives are at stake. Peter tightened his fists. “Come on, Spider-Man…” Peter ran up to the main entrance. It was locked. He tried other emergency exits to no avail. The only place to go was up. Peter climbed the power plant’s aluminium façade until he was on top of the roof. He
peered down from a row of skylights. The room was dark, but the arc reactor was easy to spot. It was situated in the centre of the clearing. A large, circular glass tube made up the reactor’s body. It looked like a transparent donut being clamped in place by red claws. The machine radiated an ice blue glow. Particles travelled in the tube at an astounding speed. Thick bundles of cables connected the reactor to stacks of energy storage modules.

Peter climbed to the next row of skylights to get a better view. He gasped at the sight the change in perspective revealed. At the front of the reactor stood a man with blond buzz cut hair, and between him and the reactor, was another man clutching a burned arm.

Happy.

Eric Savin closed in on the injured head of security one step at a time. Happy tried to turn on his melted walkie-talkie. “Hey!” Peter yelled. He slammed his fist onto the glass. The skylight didn’t budge. Peter looked around. There was nothing he could use. Beneath him, Savin ripped the walkie-talkie from Happy’s hand. Happy pulled out his best boxing stance, but he was no match for the Extremis enhanced ex-Lieutenant Colonel. Savin beat Happy to the ground. Peter screamed for him to stop.

None of the people inside heard Peter’s plea. Savin seemed to be enjoying the fight. He kicked Happy once more on the stomach and watched Happy crawl away from him with a sadistic smile. This gave Peter time. Peter forced himself to take his eyes off Happy. He scanned his surroundings again. The plant’s aluminium cladding reflected a silver sheen under the moonlight.

That’s it. The plant’s façade was well-built. Sheets of aluminium were held in place by tiny bolts. They overlapped each other neatly, but there was a gap where the sheets met the skylight. Peter dug his nails under the exposed edge. He pulled with all his might. Bolts popped out one by one as he ripped the metal off the roof. Peter folded the sheet into a cone shape, wincing as it sliced open his palm. He drove the pointy end of the cone into the glass. On the third strike, the glass shattered.

Peter landed in front of Happy and drop-kicked Savin to the other end of the room. “Pick on someone your own size! Asshole.”

“Kid?” Happy looked up. His left eye was swollen shut. “What the shit—get outta here!” Happy yelled as he pointed at the door.

“So, you’re the one who took out Brandt.” A voice sounded from the opposite end of the room. Savin righted himself and straightened his army fatigues. “Well it don’t matter, ’cause you ain’t getting past me.”

“I’m not gonna let you destroy the reactor,” Peter said.

“You’re young. New to this whole superhero thing, aren’t you?” Savin closed in. He gestured to Peter’s homemade suit. “You’ve got some years ahead of you. You sure you wanna die like this?”

“Hey, don’t you dare touch him!” Happy yelled at Savin. He turned to Peter. “Kid, you need to leave, now. Go to the main hall, find Tony or Stephen.”

“I think it’s a little too late for that.” Savin took off his gloves. His palm glowed orange in the darkness. He charged at the pair on the ground. Peter threw himself at the burning man. They
exchanged rapid blows. Savin was skilled. Peter could barely keep up even with his Spidey sense. It didn’t help that Savin’s fist radiated heat. They charred Peter’s suit every time he blocked an attack.

Just when Peter thought he was doing alright, Savin dodged Peter’s attack and grabbed him by the throat. He lifted Peter high into the air. The hand around Peter’s throat burned through his suit and blistered the skin beneath it. Peter grunted in pain. He struggled against Savin, but the man’s grip wouldn’t budge. Peter felt lightheaded from the lack of oxygen. His feet dangled beneath him haphazardly.

Happy had been too injured to fight, but at the sight of Peter getting strangled, he miraculously got back on his feet. “I said don’t you dare touch him!” Happy tackled Savin to the ground, “Kid, run!” The resulting forced threw Peter to the ground too. His phone was ripped from his earbuds. The slim rectangle fell out of his pocket and landed three feet away. Peter wheezed at the flow of oxygen entering his brain. The next thing he knew, Savin was walking towards him. Happy laid face down and motionless. Savin grabbed Peter by the front of his suit and tossed him into the arc reactor.

Peter’s Spidey sense kicked in. Despite still questioning his surroundings, he instinctively grabbed the inner edge of the reactor. It prevented him from falling into the electrified circle. Savin tsked. “You don’t know when to give up, do you?” With flaming hands, he melted one of the plant’s structural columns. The beam it had been supporting fell on top of Peter. Peter cried in pain and slid a few more inches into the reactor.

Savin took a deep breath and let out a deafening roar. Fire breathed from his lungs. He circled the reactor and lit everything he could on fire. With Happy’s security badge, he overrode the reactor’s default settings and pushed up all the levers. The reactor’s core grew instantly brighter. “Well, that’s it from me,” Savin’s voice rang through the crackling fire. “It’d be nice to light this thing myself, but I need to walk away from this.” He pointed at the arc reactor. “And don’t say I didn’t give you a choice. You can either let go now and save yourself the trouble, or wait until you go up with the rest of the Expo. How’s that for your first day on the job?” Savin laughed. He kicked Happy’s limp body once more on his way out. The door slammed shut behind him.

At this distance, electricity from the reactor’s core was close enough to tickle Peter’s face. A bead of sweat dripped from the tip of his nose. Peter watched it vaporise on its way down. Peter grunted as he tried to right himself, but the beam was too heavy. He gasped for breath. The burning plastic emitted a toxic fume into the air. Fire closed in on the arc reactor from all sides. Any minute now, they’d damage the reactor and cause a catastrophic explosion, wiping out half the Expo. It’d kill thousands of people, himself included.

“Hello!” Peter yelled at the top of his lungs, “Anybody there? I’m in here! I’m stuck, I can’t move —help!” Peter coughed under the fumes. “Mr. Stark! Mr. Strange! Somebody—help me! I’m in here…” Peter choked. No one replied. Savin must’ve killed everyone in the vicinity. Peter sobbed as he slid another inch into the reactor’s core. His right palm was slippery with blood. His throat hurt from the blistered flesh. He never should’ve left his apartment. He never should’ve come to the Expo. Now he was going to die alone in a power plant. He was never going to see his aunt and uncle again.

Tears blurred Peter’s vision, or maybe it was the fumes entering his cracked goggles. Peter breathed in small hitched breaths. He could feel the flames heat up the beam on his back. What was he going to do? He didn’t have his suit, didn’t have backup. Even Karen was out of his reach.

Peter stayed there for a while. Steel creaked around him as the plant went up in flames. Peter
checked his environment one last time for anything he could use. What he saw was not an object. Through the reactor’s glass tube, the blue haze of electricity, and the orange flames, he saw Happy. Despite the ruckus, Happy hadn’t budged. Peter didn’t know if the man who’d tried to save him was still alive.

The unmoving figure reminded Peter of why he’d wanted to become a superhero.

He wasn’t a superhero only when it was convenient. He didn’t don a mask to get a pat on the back. He became Spider-Man to protect the neighbourhood he loved, to lock up the bad guys so they couldn’t hurt those who were trying to make an honest living. He did it to save lives.

There was a life in need of saving right in front of him.

Peter tried to lift the beam again. It wouldn’t budge. He was in an awkward position and used all four limbs to hold onto the reactor’s glass tube. The tube’s polished surface was slippery, and he didn’t have anything beneath him to stand on. After a few failed attempts, he’d slid down the opening to where the donut shaped tube was at its narrowest. This was as much leverage as he was going to get.

If only he had his suit. Out of the hundreds of web shooter configurations, there was bound to be one where it could hold the beam up while he escaped.

*If you are nothing without the suit, then you shouldn’t have it.*

Mr. Stark’s words chose that moment to return to Peter’s head. Peter clenched his teeth. The suit didn’t make the hero. He’d have to make it out of this one himself.

Peter shifted his left arm until it was directly in front of his face, then let go with his right. With only three points of contact, he felt the weight of the beam even more. Peter retracted his bloodied hand and checked the web fluid. The vial was half empty, but it should be enough.

At the reactor’s core, sparks from the blue sphere licked the glass tube once every three seconds. It was very much functional. The eerie glow promised certain death should Peter be foolish enough to touch it. With great effort, Peter retracted his bloodied hand and checked the web fluid. The vial was half empty, but it should be enough.

Peter cried in pain as the beam on his back began to burn through his clothes. His jaw was clenched so tightly he was about to shatter his teeth. Peter shook his head and tried to focus. If his math was correct, and it sometimes wasn’t, at this density the tensile strength of the fibre should be enough to support his weight without bowing enough to touch the core. If he was right, he’d be able to stand on the webbing and gain enough leverage to push the beam off him. If he wasn’t…

Peter swallowed. He looked once more to the side. The flames were about to engulf Happy. “Come on Peter…” Peter murmured. “Come on Spider-Man!” With a surge of courage, Peter let go. In the fraction of a second that followed, Peter changed his position from horizontal to vertical. His feet landed firmly on the webs beneath him. Peter raised his arms just in time to catch the falling beam. He screamed as the burning metal touched his injured palm. The webs beneath him dipped but bounced back up.

Peter panted. He was still alive. “Come on Spider-Man!” Peter yelled. With new found leverage, Peter lifted the beam and pushed it off to the side. He climbed out of the reactor and collapsed onto the floor. His limbs were soft like jelly, but this was no place to rest. Peter limped over to Happy
and threw the staunch man’s arm over his shoulder. He dragged them both out of the door Savin had used to escape. Peter lowered Happy onto a patch of grass a safe distance away. He checked for a pulse and let out a small laugh when he found one.

He’d done it, but that was only half the job.

Peter ran back into the burning building. If he didn’t power down the reactor, all his efforts would be for nought. His cracked goggles were blocking his vision, so Peter ripped off his mask. He coughed under the fumes, but quickly remembered to lower himself and breathe in the clean air closer to the ground. Luckily, Stark Industries had met all fire safety requirements. Fire extinguishers were scattered around the place. With one in his hands and another sandwiched under his arm, Peter sprayed like there was no tomorrow. The white foam doused the flame that was near the reactor, but as Peter went around in a circle, it became clear he was fighting a losing battle.

“—ter!” Peter paused as he heard his name. At first, he’d thought he was imagining things, but in time the tiny voice called again.

“Karen?” Peter found the phone he’d lost. The screen was shattered but the hardware was still functional. Peter cranked it up to max volume. Karen’s voice rang through the speakers.

“Peter, you have to disconnect the reactor and reroute the power. You don’t have a badge, but there is a maintenance setting electricians can access without clearance. Once the Expo is reconnected to the grid, the reactor can be switched off,” Karen said.

“Disconnect, reroute, switch off…got it!” Peter said. One by one, he unplugged the thick bundles of cables sprawling from the reactor’s base. After the reactor was disconnected, an option appeared on the reactor’s control panel.

Reroute power?

[Y] [N]

Peter jabbed his finger down on the [Y] option.

Power down arc reactor?

[Y] [N]

Peter didn’t hesitate. After he’d tapped the option twice, the reactor’s core dimmed to its normal brightness, then the light snuffed out. Electricity in the tube dispersed a moment later.

Peter crawled out of the burning building. He flipped himself over and collapsed next to Happy. He was feeling lightheaded. Perhaps he’d breathed in too much of the fumes. Above him, stars twinkled against a black canvas. A corner of the inky canvas was lit orange, but that was okay. Nothing was going to blow up any more.

“Peter, try to remain conscious. I’ve called police, ambulance, and the fire brigade. They are on their way,” Karen said. Peter let out a sigh of relief. They were going to be alright.

Footsteps sounded on the grass beside him. Peter furrowed his brows as the person paddled closer. That was weird. They sounded too quiet to be any of the aforementioned groups.

The next thing Peter knew, he was pulled up by the front of his hoodie. The hand lifted him into the air until his feet dangled freely beneath him. With great effort, Peter looked up and saw a pair of fuming orange eyes.
*dun dun dunn*n* Oh Peter, what are you going to do? :O

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
“Why won’t you just die?” Savin snarled through clenched teeth. Clever quips tickled the back of Peter’s throat, but his mind was hazy, and he couldn’t quite figure out what he wanted to say.

The noise of crackling fire, creaking buildings, and Karen shouting his name blended into a muted cacophony. His right hand was numb, so Peter lifted the one he could. He retracted his middle and ring finger. A spurt of sticky webbing shot out and struck Savin’s face. Savin stumbled backward, dropping Peter to the ground. Peter used the window of opportunity to web Savin’s legs together too. Above the burning power plant, a spectacular array of fireworks lit up the sky: the finale of Mr. Stark’s presentation.

The dazzling lights returned some sense to Peter. Since escaping the fire he’d been stuck in a state of limbo. Peter wanted to black out, but he couldn’t. He and Savin had unfinished business.

Across the yard, Savin was swinging his right arm to ward off Peter’s imaginary attacks. He used his free hand to rip off the webs on his face. Peter knew there’d be major consequences if he let Savin return to fighting condition. He was running low on web fluid, and the heat of Extremis could burn through his webbing in an instant. Peter needed something that could deal permanent damage.

Behind Savin, the roaring fire burned ever brightly. The building’s silver façade fell piece by piece, revealing its steel structure. The matrix of columns and beams groaned under the strain of the heat. Peter saw the familiar shape. He’d been trapped under it minutes ago. An idea came to Peter. He shot a string of webs at the exposed beam and wrapped the end of the web around his palm. With both feet planted firmly to the ground, Peter pulled as hard as he could. At first the beam wouldn’t budge, but as Peter persisted, the junction where the beam was supported by the column loosened. Peter grunted. His arms, his abdomen, his legs…everything ached. He let out a lengthy cry and gave the beam one last yank.

The structure caved. The burning beam slipped free of its socket, tilting forward as it fell to the ground. The tip of the beam landed on Savin’s shoulder. Peter heard a hard crack, and then an animalistic screech. Knowing that the deed had been done, Peter tumbled to the ground too. Whatever happened next, he wouldn’t be able to get back up.

Before him the flames consumed Savin, but the man didn’t seem to feel pain. His entire body was a burning ember. Tendrils of flame licked his features as if the heat had emerged from within his cracked flesh. The beam holding him down melted into a puddle of white, smouldering goo. Savin stood and took a wobbly step forward. There was a dent on his shoulder from where the beam had landed.

“We are the future!” Savin yelled. “We would’ve had everything, if it wasn’t for you Avengers!” Molten steel dripped from his body as he walked. The man approached Peter with a feral
expression. His sadistic smile accentuated the insanity in his eyes. “I’m going to kill you, and then I’m going to kill him.” Savin pointed at Happy. “I wonder what Tony Stark would say if he was here… Would he beg for mercy? Well it’s too late now!”

Savin reached for Peter. Peter squeezed his eyes shut. What came next wasn’t pain like he’d expected. Peter felt the ground tremble as something heavy landed beside him. He heard metal connect with flesh and bone, and then Savin’s pained grunt. Peter opened his eyes. In front of him stood a man clad in red and gold. His armour gleamed under the light from the burning plant.

“I’d tell you to back the fuck off,” Mr. Stark said. In that moment, Peter knew he was safe.

Savin roared from across the yard. He dug himself out of the grass and charged at Mr. Stark. The arc reactor on Mark Sixty grew brighter as Savin neared. Mr. Stark took a step forward and lowered his glowing repulsors. A ray of raw energy erupted from the reactor. It sliced through the night and left a gaping hole on Savin’s chest. Savin’s bright orange eyes dulled and he fell to the ground. His body blackened like spent coal.

“Walk away from that you son of a bitch,” Mr. Stark said. He stood there for a few seconds to make sure Savin wasn’t getting back up. The next thing Peter knew, Mr. Stark was by his side. “Kid…? Shit—hey stay with me. Help’s on the way. Peter! Peter can you hear me?”

Peter nodded. Which was a mistake, because the movement caused his eyes to roll back uncontrollably. Darkness surrounded him. It was warm, comfortable, and Peter gave into the temptation of rest.

Tony sat at the penthouse bar, shoulders slumped and nursing a headache. He grabbed the closest drink within reach. It was a bottle of gin. Tony unscrewed the cap but paused before its content could hit the glass. He stared at the damned liquor long and hard. With a sigh, Tony closed the bottle back up and leaned forward until his forehead touched the cool benchtop.

He really screwed up this time, hadn’t he? Tony could swear his heart had stopped beating midway through reading Peter’s text. He’d pushed through the crowd and blasted off without knowing where he was going. In the end, a Stark Industries satellite had detected the fire, which triggered a chain of pre-programed safety measures, including notifying Tony.

After he’d dealt with that bastard Savin, Tony brought Peter and Happy back to the tower. In a flurry of uncontained panic, Tony injected them both with the Extremis Super Serum. Thankfully, Happy’s injuries had looked worse than they were, and with the help of the weakened Extremis virus, he was up and running in a matter of minutes. Peter hadn’t been so lucky. He’d breathed in a lot of fumes, the skin around his throat was blistered, and he suffered minor burns all over his body. His back was a raw and bloody mess. Tony had to cut his homemade suit off to treat his wounds.

It’d taken Peter another hour to wake up. By then, Stephen had apprehended the remaining Extremis soldiers and learned about what happened. Tony could recall the shame he’d felt when he
told Stephen to watch over the kid. He flew back to the Expo alone. Not that the small army of professionals there needed him. The kid had contained the situation well. The majority of the visitors didn’t even know there was a fire.

No. The Expo hadn’t been why Tony left. He’d left because he couldn’t bear to look Peter in the eyes. Peter had looked up to him, regarded him as his hero, and he’d let Peter down. Not only had Tony messed up big time, he also made it harder for Peter to save the day by taking his suit away. This directly resulted in Peter experiencing his worst injuries to date.

Tony pulled on his hair as hard as he could. The imagined scenarios of what could have happened drove him up the wall. Tony couldn’t believe he’d left himself wide open like that. He’d spent so many years preparing for what was on the outside of Earth, he turned sloppy when it came to threats that came from within.

If Peter hadn’t been the intuitive and intelligent kid that he was, thousands would’ve perished under Tony’s nose. Savin had taken out the security team stationed around the power plant. Happy could’ve died too. Peter could’ve fallen into the arc reactor. So many things could’ve gone wrong.

“Is Mr. Stark mad?” That had been the last thing the kid asked before Stephen dropped him off. Tony let out a muffled grunt. Perhaps a drink wasn’t a bad idea after all. He took a sneak peek at the bottle. Though what Tony saw was not the gin he’d left there a minute ago. With drawn brows, Tony straightened and threaded his index finger through the metal loop of his car keys.

“Get up.” Tony turned at the voice. Stephen was leaning against the bar’s balustrade with his arms crossed. In place of his usual sorcerer garb, Stephen was wearing a white shirt, a grey cardigan, and dark jeans. “It’s been three days since the accident. I’m done watching you mope. We’re going to find the kid, and you’re going to tell him how you feel.”

Tony blinked. “But—”

“Don’t make me come over there,” Stephen said.

In the end, Tony did make Stephen come over. Stephen walked up to Tony, picked him up, and carried him to the garage where he was unceremoniously lowered into the driver’s seat of his sports car. “What if Peter doesn’t want to see me?” Tony said with both hands clenching the steering wheel. Shopfronts and shrubbery passed by in a blur of greens, reds, and oranges. “He probably hates me by now.”

Stephen slowly turned to face Tony. On most days, Tony would whistle at the effortlessly presentable man that was his fiancé, but today, the mixture of tinted shades, sharp cheekbones, and narrowed eyes conveyed one unmistakable sentiment. Stephen was unimpressed. Tony swallowed his protests and kept driving.

They stopped outside of Peter’s school. It was close to 3:00 p.m., and students were flooding out of the premises. Tony fiddled with the hem of his shirt. He’d found a parking spot outside the front gate, on the same side of the road as the school. Tony cursed his good luck. The spot was impossible to miss, and the car’s hot rod red paint job combined with the number plate [STARK 11] was a dead giveaway. Kids whispered as they walked past the car. A crowd gathered within minutes. So far, no one had dared to approach the tinted windows, but Tony had a feeling that sooner or later, kids would come by the dozen to ask for autographs.

“There he is,” Stephen said. Tony followed the tip of Stephen’s finger. Peter was walking toward the gate with his head down and his earbuds plugged in. The kid was typing on something ancient looking... Was that a Nokia? Thanks to the average teenager’s tendency to walk and text, Peter
padded right past the commotion. He didn’t spare the sports car a single glance.

Tony bit his bottom lip. He looked at Stephen, who gave him a gentle nod. Screw it, Tony decided. It wasn’t like he could mess up any more. He rolled down the convertible’s windows and retracted the roof. An awe-filled gasp echoed in front of the gate. “Hey, Peter!” Tony called.

Peter turned around. His music hadn’t been very loud. “Mr. Stark!” They made eye contact. A smile lit up Peter’s face. He ran up to the sports car. “What are you doing here?”

Peter carried with him the warmth of the sun. If people were staring before, they were filming now. Tony looked into Peter’s hopeful eyes and found that he was at a loss of what to say. I’m sorry for being such a bad mentor. I’m sorry for putting you in harm’s way. I’m sorry you had to come save my ass.

“Get in, kid. We are going shopping.” In the end, that was what Tony went with. He was met with puzzled looks from both Peter and Stephen. “Homecoming’s in a month. You have your outfit sorted?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that Mr. Stark. I’ll…” Peter’s words trailed off when Stephen placed a hand on his arm. The sorcerer unbuckled his seatbelt and vaulted over the backrest of the leather seat he’d been occupying. In one fluid movement, Stephen settled into the back row and gestured to the spot he vacated.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. I’ll even let you ride shotgun,” Stephen said. Tony was overwhelmed by the urge to kiss his fiancé senseless. Peter’s smile grew impossibly wider. He threw his backpack into the car and vaulted over the car door too. Tony wanted to remind these two that the doors of his convertible was fully operational, but he was having a hard time trying to talk over the grin on his face.

The three of them visited Maria’s old tailor. Tony knew Peter wouldn’t be comfortable with the ostentatious designer brands he favoured, so he took Peter to the place he frequented for special occasions. The old tailor took an immediate liking to Peter. He jotted down Peter’s measurements while Tony and Stephen picked out the suit’s material. They went with a royal blue wool and cashmere blend to accompany Peter’s playfulness. The semi-formal suit was completed with a black tie, white shirt, and white pocket square.

“Thanks Mr. Stark. You really helped me out. I was gonna wear one of my uncle’s old suit, but they don’t really fit,” Peter said after they left the shop. Tony had arranged and paid for everything. All Peter needed to do was come back in two weeks’ time for his second fitting.

“No problem, kid. Thanks for saving everyone at the Expo.” By now, Tony had calmed enough to talk about what had happened. “How are you feeling? Any side effects from the serum?”

“I’m good! I gotta say Mr. Stark, when someone isn’t using it to breathe fire at me, Extremis is pretty cool. It healed all my wounds. I’ve never felt better,” Peter said as they walked down the footpath. Stephen had cast a glamour around the group so they wouldn’t be interrupted. When Tony asked, Peter gave a vivid retelling of how he’d saved Happy and powered down the arc reactor. He made up the sound effects as he went. Tony and Stephen watched in amusement as Peter bounced left and right, dodging invisible flames.

The trio wandered around the neighbourhood until they spotted a Ben & Jerry’s. Tony ordered two scoops of Strange Day on the Rocky Road, whereas Stephen ordered a single, customary scoop of Stark Raving Hazelnuts in a cup. Peter decided to stick to Half Baked until his own flavour came out. They also picked up a tub of a Hunk of Hulk of Burning Fudge for the sanctum’s freezer.
The three sat on the rooftop of Ben & Jerry’s in comfortable silence, eating their ice-cream and watching the sun set over New York City. The atmosphere was warm and encouraging. Tony snuck a glance at Stephen, who happened to be looking back at him. Stephen gave Tony a reassuring wink. Tony took a deep breath. It was now or never. “Kid?”

“Yes, Mr. Stark?” Peter threw the remainder of the cone into his mouth and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Despite sitting in the middle of Tony and Stephen, he was oblivious to the exchange that had taken place between them.

“How am I going to say this…” Tony purposefully looked anywhere but at the kid beside him. “My dad never complimented me, and I just want to break the cycle of shame.” Tony swallowed embarrassingly loud. “Sorry I took your suit. I mean, you had it coming. Actually, turns out it was the perfect sort of tough-love moment that you needed. To urge you on, right? Wouldn’t you think? Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Peter said.

“Let’s just say it was.”

“Mr. Stark, I really—”

“You screwed the pooch,” Tony went on. “Hard. Bigtime. But then you did the right thing. You took the dog to the free clinic. You raised the hybrid puppies.” Stephen cleared his throat. “Okay, not my best analogy. I guess what I’m really trying to say is…Pete, you did good out there. Hell, you did great. You nailed it. You saved thousands of people, rooted out the bad buys, saved Happy. I owe you one.” Tony gave Peter a nudge on the shoulder.

“Really?” Peter’s head snapped up. “You…you mean that?”

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed. Now that it was out the open, the rest came smoother. “It’s not easy, putting others before yourself. I didn’t learn that lesson until my forties. You’re a good kid, with a big heart. What you did was very heroic, and I’m so proud of you.”

For a moment none of them said anything. Tony thought he’d messed up. Moisture welled up in Peter’s eyes and his bottom lip began to tremble. Tony looked to Stephen in panic. Before he could ask for help, Peter threw his arms around Tony. Tony jumped at the contact. He wasn’t sure how he should react, but he didn’t break away from Peter either. As the seconds ticked by, Tony slowly leaned in and wrapped his arms around Peter too.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark,” Peter muttered.

“Don’t mention it, kid. And you can call me Tony.”

“Okay, Tony.” Without letting go, Peter pulled away a little and looked up. “Now this is a hug, right?”

“Don’t get cheeky with me, young man.” Tony looked to Stephen who was watching them with gentle eyes. “Oh, what the heck. I’m calling a group hug. It’s good for morale. Stephanie, get over here.” Stephen let out a soft chuckle. He threw his arms around both Tony and Peter. The three of them soaked up each other’s presence. When they finally parted, Tony was left feeling thoroughly refreshed. Who knew something as simple as a hug could fill him with so much energy.

“Come here, I wanna show you something.” Tony spun his arm in a circle. Stephen understood the gesture and opened a portal back to Stark Tower. They stepped into Tony’s lab. Tony rounded the workbenches loaded with schematics and retrieved an object from a hidden drawer.
Tony brushed off the dust that had gathered, revealing the metallic blue, black, and red texture beneath. In its dormant form, the Iron Spider suit was programmed to maintain a variety of shapes. Currently, it had been set to compact form, which took up the same amount of space as the arc reactor in his chest. Tony had made this battle version of the suit for Peter shortly after he finished the original. He’d planned on saving it as a graduation gift, for when Peter was old enough to officially join the Avengers.

Tony placed the chunk of nanoparticles on the floor. Within a fraction of a second, the chunk expanded into a full-scale suit. Peter yelped. He circled the outfit that had appeared out of nowhere. “Yeah, give that a look,” Tony said. He took in the awe in Peter’s eyes and smiled triumphantly. Of course the suit was impressive, he designed it. “I think with a little more mentoring, you could be a real asset to the team.”

“To the—to the team?” Peter stammered.

“Yeah. When you are ready, why don’t you try that on? We’ll call a press conference, and Stephen and I will introduce the world to the newest official member of the Avengers: Spider-Man.” Peter’s mouth hung wide open. He looked at the suit then back at Tony “So, after the press conference, Happy will show you to your room. The Avengers live upstate in the compound, but I’m willing to make an exception. You’re welcome to grab a suite in the tower, stay closer to home. You’ll fit right in.”

Peter considered this. He snuck another glance at the Iron Spider suit, but instead of the overjoyed response Tony had expected, Peter ended up lowering his gaze. “Thank you, Tony…but I’m good.”

“You’re good?” Tony was taken aback by the answer. He spun his hands for Peter to elaborate. “How are you good?”

“Well, I mean, I’d rather just stay on the ground for a little while: friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man. Somebody’s gotta look out for the little guy, right?” Peter asked.

“You turning me down?” Tony’s eyebrows shot up. He’d thought Peter would jump at the chance to be a part of the team officially. “You better think about this. Look at that.” Tony pointed to the suit. “Now look at me. Last chance, yes, no?”

“No,” Peter said firmly.

“Okay.” Tony nodded. Peter’s decision had left no room for doubt. “It’s kind of a Springsteeny working-class hero vibe that I dig. Stephen will portal you home.”

“That’s okay, I’ll walk. Clear my head before I get home.”

“Alright, kiddo.”

“See you guys around.” Peter zipped up his backpack and went on his way. He turned before he reached the elevator. “Thanks again for the suit; the one I didn’t take, and also the one I’ll wear to Homecoming. By the way, that was a test, right? There’s no press conference?” Peter gestured to the Iron Spider that was giving off a dazzling sheen.


“Thank you, Tony, thank you,” Peter called out again.

“No, thank you.” Tony forced a smile as he waved Peter goodbye. He turned to Stephen as soon as
the elevator doors closed. “Crap. We need to call off the press conference.”

“Precisely why I told you to talk to the kid before you sic fifty reporters on him,” Stephen said.

“Yes, Stephanie, you are correct again.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Oh, wise sage, kindly bestowed your wisdom upon this mellowing fool.” Stephen levelled him with a dirty look. “All jokes aside, glad we did talk to the kid. Can you imagine the excuse we would’ve had to come up if this happened on the day? Already used the engagement card. Can’t pull that one again.”

“We could’ve used the wedding date,” Stephen suggested.

“Happy will be doing laps around the tower if that puppy got loose.” Tony shuddered at the imagery.

“We need to set a decoy date,” Stephen contemplated. “Hold the ceremony before that, so the photos stay out of the press.”

“Come at them out of left field, good point, but first we need to finish wedding planning. Oh, and remind me to return the kid’s old suit. I should get him a new phone while I’m at it. Have you seen the fossil he’s typing on?” Tony transformed the Iron Spider suit back to compact form. He tossed the chunk of nanoparticles into the air and felt the weight of it when it landed in his hand.

It’d be there when Peter needed it, but for the time being, Peter knew what was best for him. Tony smiled and shook his head. It seemed like yesterday when he’d met Peter for the first time.

Kids grew up so quickly.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, folks: Homecoming wrapped up in a neat bow tie. The Guardians will finally make an appearance next chapter. From there, the Infinity War arc will hit the ground running. Prepare for evil purple space thumb. Things are about to get angsty. >:D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Music has always been an integral part of the Guardians films. For the best reading experience, listen to the tunes before you read!

Featured song:
The Spinners - Rubberband Man

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morning, March 28th, 2018 – Space

-  

Hand me down my walkin’ cane
Hand me down my hat
Hurry now and don’t be late
‘Cause we ain’t got time to chat
You and me we’re goin’ out
To catch the latest sound
Guaranteed to blow your mind
So high you won’t come down

-  

Music blasted from the speakers of the Milano. Quill moved his shoulders from left to right, jamming to the upbeat tune. With the warmth of a Main Sequence Star on his face, Quill raised his index finger into the air. “Hey ya’ll prepare yourself for the rubberband mannnnnnnnnnnnnnn!” His voice echoed in the cockpit. The light of FTL travel coloured the interior of the Milano in shades of pink, blue, and purple. “Sing it Drax!” Quill pointed at the grey alien. Suspicious snoring noises answered from the seat beneath him.

“You're bound to lose control when the rubberband starts to jam…” The soft voice was masked by the music, but Quill caught Gamora singing along. That’s my girl. Quill smiled to himself.

Rocket yawned beside him. “Why are we doing this again?”

“It’s a distress signal Rocket. Someone could be dying,” Gamora said.

“I get that,” Rocket said. “But why are we doing it?”

“‘Cause we’re nice! And maybe whoever it is will give us a little cheddar cheese for our effort.” Quill rubbed his fingers together. Rocket nodded in understanding.

“Which isn’t the point,” Gamora said.
“Which isn’t the point,” Quill echoed the sentiment. “I mean, if he doesn’t pony up…”

“We take his ship,” Drax said.

“Exactly!” Rocket sat up straighter in his seat.

“B—b—b—b—bingo!” Quill exclaimed. Gamora looked at him in disbelief. Quill cleared his throat and shook his head at her, indicating there was no way they’d do that.

They were totally gonna do that.

“We’re arriving.” Mantis lifted her head. She had been traveling with them since they beat the crap out of his biological dad. Quill considered her a part of the crew. She might be the newest addition to the Guardians, but she was fitting in nicely. Her powers were handy, and she’d saved their asses on a few occasions.

“Alright, Guardians. Don’t forget this may be dangerous, so let’s put on our mean faces,” Quill said. He lowered the music. A loud beeping noise sounded behind him. It didn’t ring in tune to the beat and threw him off his rhythm. Quill looked back. It was Groot with his stupid video game again. They’d brought it for him at a salvage yard. Since then Groot had been glued to it. He wouldn’t do any chores and ignored Quill when he tried to lecture him about it. “Groot, put that thing away, now. I don’t wanna tell you again.”

The Milano left FTL mode and came to a momentary halt. They were in a distant sector of the universe. Quill held his breath as he surveyed the surrounding massacre. He searched the horizon for signs of trouble. The crew stayed alert as the Milano glided between alien matter and chunks of a tattered mothership. Majority of the drifting corpses were either burned or blasted into smithereens; an explosion, it seemed. It was hard to tell which species had been hit, but occasionally they’d come across an intact corpse. The dead had small eyes, protruded jaws, and pale skin infused with armour. Quill was not one to judge a book by its cover, but over the years of travelling the galaxy, he’d discovered that cybernetically enhanced reptilians were rarely friendly.

“What happened…?” Mantis muttered more to herself than asking a question.

Quill glanced at Gamora. She had a better understanding of the different species, a result of traveling far and wide in her youth. Quill didn’t like the uneasy look on her face. “Hey, you alright?”

“Yeah.” Gamora looked shaken, but she recovered quickly. “I didn’t expect to see them here. They perished long ago. When I got word of their demise, I was still…working for Thanos.”

The answer earned her concerned glances from the crew. “Whoa…should we be expecting him?” Quill asked. He did a mental tally of their ammo. They’d restocked a week ago and hadn’t entered any large-scale shootouts since, but Thanos was one of the most powerful Warlords in existence.

“No. The Chitauri mothership was destroyed years ago. There’s nothing for us here,” Gamora said as another squadron of alien corpses floated past them. Remnants of the mothership obstructed the light emitted by a distant star. The drifting dead sent shivers up Quill’s back.
“Looks like we’re not getting paid.” Rocket broke the silence.

Quill cleared his throat. “So much for hauling ourselves to the ass end of nowhere.” He pulled the control column toward himself and turned the Milano around. Just as he let out a sigh of relief, something crashed into the ship’s windscreen. The large chunk rocked the cockpit. Quill yelped in surprise.

“Wipers! Wipers! Get it off!” Rocket exclaimed. Now that Quill took a closer look, the chunk was really three corpses tangled together. Two Chitauri soldiers clenched onto a white and navy android. Even in death, their webbed fingers locked each other in place. The three had been drifting together until it crashed into the Milano’s windscreen.

“Wait,” Gamora said to Rocket, whose fingers were inches away from activating the wipers. “That’s not a Chitauri.” She stood to get a better look. “The Chitauri had been on a mission to invade Earth when they were killed by opposing forces. It was the first loss Thanos experienced. Before then, his army had traversed the universe undefeated. I’ve heard rumours about him, this human who denied Thanos his prize.”

“Think that could be him?” Quill asked.

“Earth,” Rocket mused. “Quill, isn’t that where you came from?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t been back since Yondu took me,” Quill said. Gamora looked at him expectantly. Quill had a bad feeling about this. “We’re not getting that thing on my ship.”

They ended up hauling the corpses onto his ship. Drax pried the Chitauri off the android. Lucky for him, nothing decomposed without oxygen, otherwise the stench would’ve been nasty. Quill tossed the corpses out of the airlock. When he returned, the crew were gathered around Rocket’s workbench. The android looked worse for wear. Half the coloured paint had been scratched off. The Chitauri had clawed away at him before they died. Though no major body parts were missing, and most of the damage seemed superficial. Mantis hovered her hand above the android’s forehead. “I do not sense life within him.”

“That’s because it’s just a droid.” Rocket knocked on the android’s golden faceplate. “Yup, this is the thing that sent the distress signal,” he said as he checked his monitor.

“The one who defeated the Chitauri wore a suit of armour. This could be one of his servants.” Gamora said.

“Only one way to find out.” Rocket plugged his monitor into the android’s power jack. His tiny claws ghosted over the keypad. “This thing’s got some solid defences. It’ll take—”

Mantis gasped as the android came to life. “Activating emergency power supply…searching for signal…” the android said in a robotic voice. His crew assumed battle stance. Drax drew out his twin blades as Rocket, Gamora, and Quill extended their guns. Even Mantis flipped open her pocket knife. The only one who seemed unphased by the turn of events was Groot. The video game beeped in quick succession. Quill, preoccupied with the hostile presence, vowed to have a strong word with him later.

“Signal lost,” the android said. It straightened from laying to standing. Quill aimed for the spot between its glowing eyes. “You are in possession of the property of Anthony Edward Stark, alternatively known as Iron Man of the Avengers. Please refrain from tampering with my network, or I will be forced to take countermeasures. Alternatively, connect me to the internet, or return me to Stark Tower, located at 200 Park Avenue, Midtown Manhattan, New York City, for a reward.”
The crew lowered their weapons. Drax eyed the android suspiciously. “A reward, huh?” Rocket mused. “How much we talkin’ about?”

“As of the time I was manufactured, five hundred thousand United States Dollars,” the android said.

Rocket whistled. “Never been to Earth, but that sounds like it’s worth the fuel.”

Quill looked around the room. His eyes met with Gamora’s. “An enemy of Thanos is an ally of ours,” Gamora said. Drax agreed. Mantis stashed away her pocket knife and nodded too. Groot was absorbed in his game.

“Alright Guardians,” Quill shrugged, “let’s buckle up and take him back home.”

Stephen sat at his desk in the sanctum, mulling over the results he’d gathered from browsing the future. On the holographic display, millions of icons flowed across the screen as he swiped left and right. He’d categorised the potential outcomes into two folders: losses, and catastrophic losses.

Stephen locked the outcomes that were no longer plausible due to changes in the existing timeline. When the task was done, he sighed and closed the file. Both he and Tony had tried to remain optimistic about the dreary results, but as the months ticked by, Stephen was feeling the choking pressure more than ever.

As of last night, he’d seen more than seven billion failures. The Mad Titan would soon arrive. They were running out of options. Where was it? That guaranteed success from Tony’s past life?

Since returning from the Dark Dimension, Stephen had made countless attempts to revisit Tony’s old timeline. And he’d seen it, to varying degrees of success, but the events were never quite the same. Minute differences in a person’s action could lead to drastic changes in the timeline. The Time Stone allowed its wielder to see events future and past, but it didn’t allow the wielder to jump across realities, at least not with Stephen’s current set of skills. Stephen had contemplated why he was able to see Tony’s past life. The only explanation had been that during his confrontation with Dormammu, his act of looping time endlessly had created a fissure in the fabric of reality. His consciousness had slipped through the cracks of the multiverse and arrived at a place known only as ‘The Crossroads’.

The Crossroads was another dimensional reality. A place where the laws of physics were rendered moot. A single tomb had mentioned it in the library of Kamar-Taj. It was a part of The Ancient One’s private collection, a collection Stephen inherited after she’d passed. The Crossroads served as a central node point which connected an infinite number of alien dimensions. The tomb claimed that if one knew where to look, The Crossroads opened gateways to other realities in the Multiverse.

Stephen had been baffled by the notion. It was impossible to leave one reality and enter another, for time was a linear line. But how else would he explain what he’d witnessed? Perhaps the key
had been that only his astral projection was displaced. His physical body, which remained on Earth, had acted as an anchor that linked him to the world he belonged. His astral projection might’ve roamed free in another, but he was still technically a part of his own universe.

Short of risking the integrity of the space-time continuum again, there was no way Stephen could revisit The Crossroads. With no alternative solution, the Time Stone remained Stephen’s only source of foresight. Since the sceptre had been returned to Earth, two years had passed in the blink of an eye.

They were running out of time.

Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked toward the daybed in his study and found a sliver of comfort in the man napping there. At least Tony’s front progressed well. Over the years he’d slowly gained the support of world leaders either through personal charisma, political favours, or downright blackmail. The World Security Net had been fully operational since the beginning of March. They’d used the month to amend flaws in the system. Due to Tony’s immovable stance against creating a stronger AI, Jarvis had been tasked to pilot the Net in the case of an invasion. They both knew Jarvis’ modest might was not enough, but a semi-functional Net was better than an army of murderous robots.

Stephen padded over to Tony. There was no such thing as a day off for Iron Man. The smaller man had returned from a day of Stark Industries meetings. He had a fund-raising dinner for the Iron Spirit Grant lined up in the evening. A ray of sunlight shone through the sanctum’s circular window. The weather was beginning to warm. Soon the trees lining Bleecker Street would sprout afresh after a winter of frost. Tony was wrapped up in a thin blanket. The sun tinted his brown locks with a golden hue. When Stephen was lucky enough to thread his fingers through them, the soft strands would caress his hand like a feather, inciting a playful tickle. Stephen resisted the urge to fiddle with Tony’s hair. Tony was a light sleeper, and he’d already committed the sensation to memory.

“Doc, we’ve got incoming, Bi-Frost energy signature,” Friday said from his watch. True to her words, in the seconds that followed, a thunderous crash rocked the sanctum.

“What the—” Tony jerked awake.

Stephen rolled his eyes. He regarded the mandalas that had activated outside the sanctum with an air of resignation. “I’ll get it.” The cloak flew to Stephen. He trod down the steps that led to the foyer. As he walked, Stephen’s exasperation was replaced by a hint of unease. Thor had made other trips to Earth following his initial run-in with the sanctum’s defence. He’d navigated those trips without trouble, always landing on the sidewalk, a step from the sanctum’s entrance. Something must’ve happened for him to make another blunder.

Stephen opened the heavy wooden doors. What he saw turned his heart to ice. An Asgardian lay on the sidewalk in bloodied armour. A stub of red fabric was all that remained of his cape. Thor tried to right himself but coughed out blood instead. Pedestrians surrounded him, too afraid to approach. “Step back,” Stephen commanded. He held out his hands and drew with threads of light. The resulting spell levitated Thor. Stephen carried him into the sanctum and lowered him on a bench.

“What’s going on?” Tony landed in Mark Sixty. Friday had informed him of the turn of events. His left hand augmented into a scanner. A blue wave of light washed over Thor’s pained features. “How’s he doing, Jarvis? Give me the stats.”

“Severe internal bleeding, fractured ribs and skull,” Jarvis said.
“Fractured skull?” Tony was taken aback by the answer. Goosebumps crept up Stephen’s back. Asgardian physique was tough. Fuelled by their connection with their homeland, the royal bloodline of Asgard was difficult to injure. The ones that’d done this had the might of a god.

“He’s…coming,” Thor choked. He pushed himself up halfway then slid back down.

“What’s easy there, big guy.” Tony stabilised Thor, who was tipping over. “Who’s coming?” The look on Tony’s face told Stephen he knew the answer.

“Thanos.” Vengeance burned bright in Thor’s lightning blue eyes. “His army came to Asgard, in search of the Tesseract. He slaughtered half my people. Father fought him with the Infinity Stone he sought, but it was of no use. Thanos wielded another with all-crushing might. He could control it with a golden gauntlet. This is my vision: Ragnarok.”

Tony and Stephen exchanged looks. “Is there anything we can do?” Tony asked. He turned to Stephen. “Grab everyone. We take the fight to Thanos.”

“It’s too late. Asgard is gone. The clashing might of the Infinity Stones split Asgard’s foundations in half. I watched my homeland crumble apart. Heimdall gave his life to send me here.” Thor squeezed his eyes shut. Moisture wetted his cheeks. “Some may yet live, but I know not of their fate.”


“He left for an item of paramount importance. He promised to meet me on Earth. If he did not arrive before I…” Thor cut himself short. Stephen did not like what he was implying.

“Doc, foreign energy signature detected. It’s in your study,” Friday said.

“Stay here,” Tony said to Thor. His helmet closed, concealing his features. Stephen changed into sorcerer robes. They flew back to his study. At a glance, the source of the anomaly was invisible. Stephen closed his eyes and reached into the space with his senses. He found the source pulsating waves of energy from on top of his desk. Stephen approached the object and picked it up. It was the compass Loki had gifted him.

Since it’d tracked down Kaecilius, Stephen had kept the hand-crafted trinket around. As long as he had a strand of the being’s hair, the compass could track down creatures common or other-worldly. It was useful when Stephen dealt with threats from another dimension. The compass’ energy output was intensifying. Stephen had never seen it react so violently. The wood was radiating a bizarre chill. Stephen threw it to the ground before the cold could burn his hand.

The compass erupted into pillars of ice. Tony reacted in an instant. His right arm augmented into a shield and he stepped before Stephen to cover him from the blast. Stephen kept his eyes on the ice. When the reaction slowed, the pillars had rearranged into a perfect circle.

“It’s…a summoning ring,” Stephen said. The dots connected in his mind. He lifted his hands and took down the sanctum’s defences.

“Honey, what are you doing?” Tony asked.

“Trust me.” Stephen hoped he was right, because if he wasn’t, then he would’ve opened the sanctum’s doors to something nasty. Runes appeared on the ice as if carved by invisible hands. When the last stroke was etched, each pillar emitted a beam of cosmic energy into the centre of the circle. Stephen squinted under the bright light. The energy output punctured the roof, sending wood splinters soaring across the air. When the light dimmed, a figure crouched where the beams
had converged. “Crafty bastard.” Stephen smirked. He re-erected the sanctum’s defences and rushed to the centre of the circle, catching Loki as he fell.

“Reindeer games?” Tony retracted his helmet. He scanned Loki too.

“Fractured neck, mild concussion,” Jarvis informed.

“What happened?” Stephen asked. Loki appeared disoriented. Patches of his skin had reverted to Jotun blue. He was having difficulty breathing. A large bruise in the shape of a handprint covered his neck. It took him several seconds to register his surroundings. When he realised where he was, he looked at Stephen, and then at Tony disbelievingly. It seemed that he hadn’t expected to be alive.

“Loki?” Stephen gave the prince a gentle shake.

Loki burst out laughing. Disjointed, raspy breaths left his injured windpipe. Loki smiled triumphantly. He raised his hand. Resting between his fingers was a brilliant blue cube.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Stephen and Tony carried the two princes back to Stark Tower. From there, Tony ran an array of tests to ensure there were no underlying injuries. Earth’s medical technology provided little help for alien physique, but both Asgardian and Jotun flesh healed at an accelerated speed. Stephen closed the door to Thor and Loki’s guest room. The two princes had taken a heavy hit. Loki blacked out while Tony was scanning him. Stephen had instructed the bots to prepare two guest rooms, but in the wake of losing almost everyone he’d ever loved, Thor had refused to leave his brother’s side.

Stephen and Tony returned to the master suite. Tony sat at the foot of the bed and ran a hand down his face. Stephen leaned against the wall opposite Tony. For a while, neither of them said anything.

“As far as we know, Loki and Thor were the only survivors. Odin perished when he tried to delay Thanos.” Stephen tapped his shaking fingers against his thighs. “Thanos laid siege to Asgard for the Tesseract. The Space Stone allows teleportation through the universe. Without it, his army must traverse physically. This buys us time.” Stephen swallowed dryly. He had a foul taste in his mouth. They’d skipped dinner and hadn’t noticed the time until Tony’s fundraising event called to ask his whereabouts.

“Without the Bi-Frost, the Aether is out of our reach.” Stephen continued. Thanos was able to track the Tesseract to Asgard; the Aether was as good as gone. “The location of the Soul Stone remains a mystery. Earth now holds half of the total number of Infinity Stones.” Tony exhaled a shaky breath. Stephen knew what he was thinking. It had been their goal to separate the Infinity Stones at all cost, but one by one, the stones converged on Earth. A dreaded sense of inevitability loomed over them. Stephen took in Tony’s ashen features. He pushed off the wall and approached the bed. When Tony didn’t acknowledge his presence, Stephen sat beside Tony and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Are you alright?”

Tony covered Stephen’s hand with his own. “Yeah. I’m just…thinking.” He squeezed Stephen’s fingers. “Asgard fell so quickly. All those people…slaughtered on the streets. Odin is the most powerful being we know. If even the God of Gods was no match for Thanos…”

The Mad Titan had begun his assault strategically. Xandar, as his first stop, was an advanced civilisation an army of Outriders could best. With the Power Stone mounted on a weapon that granted him mastery over the stones, Thanos defeated the aging All-Father. Once he possessed the Space Stone, Thanos could teleport directly to Knowhere; the Collector wouldn’t stand a chance. From there he’d journey to Earth and retrieve Time and Mind. By that point, it mattered not where the Soul Stone was. Thanos would be the most powerful being in existence. Nothing would stand between him and his goal. Half of all life would perish.

Thankfully, someone had disrupted the Mad Titan’s plan. Loki had been harbouring a grudge against his former employer ever since he was freed from mind control. Of course, taking their
power difference into consideration, Loki was not the type to throw himself into the fray. Hence he waited, and as Asgard fell apart, the opportunity to be the biggest thorn in his enemy’s backside surfaced.

Regardless of whether he did it out of spite or self-preservation, Loki’s suicidal attempt to save the Tesseract had given them a fighting chance. Stephen didn’t know if the trickster had saved trillions of lives or prolonged the inevitable. Either way, it was far too early to give up. They hadn’t exhausted their options, and as long as there remained a glimpse of hope, they would continue to fight.

“We’ll find a way,” Stephen said. They had to. It wasn’t overselling it to say the fate of the universe was at stake. Tony nodded. He looked at Stephen with restless eyes. “We should get some sleep.” Stephen rose and changed into sleepwear. He could do nothing but take Tony’s mind off the matter. Tony had been avenging for far too long; empty promises were the salvation of fools.

They needed the rest for the day ahead of them. Tony agreed. He shed his suit with slow hands and an absent mind. Jarvis dimmed the lights. The arc reactor glowed faintly under Tony’s top. At first, Stephen had found it distracting, but over the years the light had become an integral part of his life. It was the last thing he saw every night as he fell asleep. The reactor’s blue glow soothed him.

When Tony was near, darkness could not approach.

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Stephen stood in a field of grass. The thick, yellow stalks brushed against his calves as wind swept across the battle marred lands. With great difficulty, he placed one foot before the other, and then the other before that. Chaos surrounded him. The army of Outriders pushed against their defences with teeth and claws. The Avengers pushed back.

“Stephen, lookout!” A string of webs shot past his shoulder. The tip glued to an Outrider’s head. Peter pulled the creature forward and slammed its skull to the ground. Stephen nodded in thanks. He conjured the Sword of Vishanti and sliced off another Outrider’s arm.

There were too many of them. Stephen couldn’t keep track of his enemies. He fought back to back with Peter and the two of them pushed to the front lines of battle. Wakanda’s energy barrier was waning. Outriders threw their armoured bodies onto the shield, their psychological programming unafraid of death.

“Tony!” Stephen yelled. His earpiece was cracked, and he’d lost the comlink. Stephen couldn’t spot the red and gold figure anywhere. Rhodes flew past them, submachine gun blazing. Outrider blood splattered onto Stephen’s face. He wiped it off with his sleeve.

Where was he? Stephen searched around him. Where was Tony?

Stephen stayed close to Peter. Outriders threatened to wrench them apart, but Stephen was experienced while Peter was nimble. They couldn’t keep this up forever. Stephen gasped for breath as he sliced off a head with too much teeth. At this rate, the invading forces would spread and
attack the fleeing citizens. The Avengers might win the battle, but they’d lose the war.

“There he is!” Peter yelled. Stephen’s head snapped up. Through layers of overlapped limbs, he caught a glimpse of Tony battling the purple-skinned Titan. Around them, the Guardians of the Galaxy were fighting the Children of Thanos. Stephen grunted as he narrowly missed an Outrider’s claw. Mark Sixty was badly damaged. The nanoparticles exposed Tony’s legs to augment into shields and canons. Stephen summoned the remainder of his energy. He and Peter were teleported across the field.

Peter landed on the grass and shot a web at the Titan. It struck Thanos’ arm, who used the web to yank Peter toward him. He swatted Peter away like a fly. The Iron Spider suit rolled out of sight. Stephen filtered out the worldly chaos and reached deep into his energy reserve. To expend personal energy was to beckon death, but what choice did he have?

Stephen’s eyes burned bright with a sinister aura. His life force evaporated, and Thanos was consumed by a raging inferno. The flames scorched the lands and turned a dozen Outriders to dust, but the target of Stephen’s attack stood unvexed. The Aether warped reality around him. The flames were near, but they could not touch the Mad Titan. Stephen collapsed. Blood trickled from his eyes and nose. A golden gauntlet pierced the veil of fire. It grabbed Tony by the neck and lifted him into the air.

“You have my respect, Stark,” Thanos said. “When I’m done, half of humanity will still be alive. I hope they remember you.” Tony thrashed against the Titan’s hold. The Infinity Stones began to glow.

“Stop,” Stephen choked. He knew what would happen if Thanos gathered the Infinity Stones. He’d seen it in it in a billion outcomes. Stephen glanced at Peter who’d crawled back to help. The Iron Spider’s glowing eyes masked fear well, but Stephen knew Peter was scared. How could he not be? He was only a boy of seventeen. He didn’t deserve to die for a future he’d never see.

_Forgive me._ The words died in Stephen’s throat. What right did he have to ask for the forgiveness of those he’d sacrifice? This was his decision to make, and his burden to bear. Stephen righted himself with shaking limbs. He took in Thanos’ towering form. The Titan gazed back, awaiting his offer.

“Spare his life, and I will give you the stones.”

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Stephen stared at the spotless ceiling. His heart pounded against his ribcage. Cold sweat coated his forehead. Stephen placed a hand on the man beside him. Tony’s naked torso was warm. Blood flowed under his unmarred skin. In the safety of their home, there were no screams or gunfire.

The colon between the numbers on the digital clock flashed as the seconds ticked by. Stephen sighed. Sleep was bound to escape him. He slipped out of the covers and shuffled to the penthouse kitchen. Stephen turned on the coffee machine. He stared blankly at the twin stream of liquid filling his cup then took a small sip. The beverage’s bitterness assaulted his taste buds. His stomach
churned. Stephen thought he should eat something, but in his mental state of fight or flight, his nervous system had deemed digestion unimportant.

Stephen finished the shot of coffee with one large gulp. As he rinsed the cup clean, his eyes were caught by a frame hanging on the far wall. Stephen dried his hands and padded over to the artwork. It was a new addition to their home. He hadn’t been paying the penthouse much attention, opting to work from the sanctum. Inside the matte black frame was a single photo.

Tony was young. He stood next to Dum-E in a function room. His mother was behind him, her knees bent as she leaned down to kiss Tony on the cheek. Their smiles lit up the faded photograph. In the backdrop, Tony’s father looked on with folded arms, but aside from the usual impatience, there was something else in his eyes. Stephen looked closer. The corner of Howard’s lips curled upward and formed a hint of a smile.

The frame was unnamed and undated. Over the years Tony had made peace with what happened to his parents. Stephen traced his fingers over Tony’s carefree face. He took in what would’ve been the Stark family. Little did young Tony know, his parents were the first of a long list of things fate would take from him.

Memories of a life he’d glimpsed through fog resurfaced in Stephen’s mind. It occurred to him that outside of unplanned expeditions down The Crossroads, he’d never met Tony’s parents in person. Stephen was overwhelmed by the urge to correct that mistake, and perhaps revisit a certain memory. He grabbed his cardigan from the armrest and instructed the cloak to keep watch in his place. Stephen raised his left hand, on which he donned two rings. The band with a sliver of discoloured metal symbolised his commitment to Tony, whereas the chunkier Sling Ring proved his mastery of the Mystic Arts.

Night drained the colour from what once had been a joyful garden. Sunless forests were the stuff of nightmares. Stephen’s shoes scraped against the asphalt path. His eyes adjusted to the moonlight. He could see it now. In the distance, a modest bluestone church.

When he reached it, Stephen walked around the ancient architecture. He lifted the lever barring the entrance to a private cemetery. The wrought iron gate swung open with a creak. Rows of sparsely erected tombstones covered the ground. From memory, Stephen found the one he searched for. On a smooth slab of marble etched a simple line of text.

_In loving memory of Howard & Maria Stark._

The word Stark brought a haunted feeling to Stephen’s chest. Stephen sat before the tombstone. He crossed his legs and told himself that he had nothing to fear. All things age; all things die. He could not hope to alter their destination. What he could alter, was the route they’d take to get there.

“You have my word. No harm will befall him.” Stephen’s gaze brushed past Howard’s name and came to linger on Maria’s. “I promise.”

No one answered him. Stephen hadn’t expected otherwise. He sat there, alone in the darkness, and as the goosebumps on his back faded, he became one with the night. Stephen looked to the spot beside the tombstone. Nothing was there save for a patch of grass, but Stephen had seen another image from a life long past. If he closed his eyes, Stephen could hear the sobs of people he did not know, see the coffin of a man he could not save, feel the wetness of tears he wished he’d cried.

Stephen’s eyes snapped open. He cursed his melodramatics. Now was not the time for inane brooding, if there ever was a time for it. Stephen retrieved the Eye of Agamotto from his pocket dimension. He’d never done this outside the sanctum, but perhaps a change in scenery would
refresh their odds. Stephen warded the graveyard with a protection spell. He hooked the pendant over his neck. The Time Stone glowed green before his chest. Stephen placed his hands on his knees and levitated into the air.

Loki had brought the Tesseract to Earth, culling most of the possible futures. The total number of outcomes had decreased to a manageable amount. Stephen would go through them again, one by one, with precision and depth for there must be a way. They couldn’t be destined to fail forever. Nothing was certain, and no plan fail proof; that was the unspoken rule governing the Multiverse.

Stephen’s astral projection left his physical body. Under the emerald glow of the Time Stone, the world and all its possibilities were laid bare for him to view. Stephen’s soul wondered. When the rising sun lined the horizon yellow, light peer through the forest’s foliage, dappling the tombstones with golden specks. Dawn had lit the first light, and with it, casted the first shadow. Stephen closed the Eye of Agamotto.

He’s found it, their chance to succeed.

But it was going to cost him.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony tapped his slippers on the carpet before the couch. He’d woken half an hour ago. Sleep had been restless, and though he’d gotten six hours, he was feeling far from the top of his game. Tony jumped at the familiar hiss. “Where were you?” He rose from the couch and walked to Stephen with wide steps. “Day after Thanos shows his face, you disappear off the radar. We were worried.”

“We?” Stephen asked. Behind him, the amber portal snapped shut. He gestured to the living area, empty save for Tony. The princes hadn’t stirred.

“Fine. I. I was worried.” Tony squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “If Jarvis hadn’t told me you left on your own I’d have started a search party.”

“Sorry.” Stephen lowered his gaze. “The ward intercepted the signal. I hadn’t planned to take long.”

“This is the part where you tell me everything.”

“I’ve found it.”

Tony’s eyes widened at the words. It seemed too good to be true. “And not a moment too soon. Show me.”

Stephen nodded. He sat Tony down on the couch. Their belongings were spread across the coffee table. Stephen ripped a page out of his notebook. “Time is a linear line,” Stephen began. He gestured to the edge of the torn page. “It was so simple. How could I have missed it?”

“Missed what?”

“The solution. This is perhaps best explained through your resurrection.” Stephen folded the page in half, then took one of the halves and folded it again. The page now looked like a lopsided ‘Z’. Stephen squashed the page flat on the coffee table, so the overlapped section was barely visible.

“Our reality is continuous. However, there are ways to tamper with it, and those affected perceive time differently. When you closed your eyes in Siberia your reality continued as you woke in Malibu.” Stephen ran his hand over the page, smooth save for the fold. “But between those events years had passed, and this missing section holds the key to our success. Before the Tesseract arrived, I could only spare each future a passing glimpse. I’d focused on the outcome, but in too many cases what I’d assumed was the end game hadn’t been the end at all. The trick was to look beyond the fold.”

Tony listened to Stephen’s explanation. He knew most of the facts, and when Stephen threaded them together in that sequence, they made a frightening amount of sense. What he couldn’t come to terms with was the execution. “This is madness. It goes against everything we’ve been trying to
do.”

“Your changes in the timeline have made this future possible. It’s the only way.”

Stephen’s reply had left no room for doubt. Tony walked to the penthouse’s floor-to-ceiling window. He leaned forward and rested his head against the cold glass. Stark Tower was tall, but not tall enough to remove the penthouse from New York’s hustle and bustle. With his enhanced eyesight, Tony could see pedestrians go about their daily lives. Stark Industries employees were filtering into the building, ready for another work day.

If they failed half of all life would cease to exist.

“We’ll need all the help we can get,” Tony said after a pause. He donned his glasses and opened the group com he’d hoped he’d never use. In the channel, the status of existing team members were categorised for Tony to view. Some were on standby while others were deployed on a mission. Tony selected all of them. The message would be broadcasted to every extraordinary individual he’d so painstakingly gathered.

Tony swallowed his insecurities. There was no time to waste.

“Avenge...assemble!”

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**Evening, March 30th, 2018 – Avengers Compound**

For the first time since its establishment, the Avengers Compound saw all its members assemble under the same roof. Avengers had been trickling into the complex as soon as fifteen minutes past Tony’s gathering call. Aside from the Asgardians, Peter had been the first to arrive, followed by Rhodey and Sam. Stephen retrieved Bruce from a hidden locale in Vietnam. Steve and Bucky had taken a day to respond. They’d been tracking down Hydra operations in the West Coast. A S.H.I.E.L.D. Quinjet dropped off Clint, and following the arrival of Natasha who’d been extracted from a mission at first notice, the door to the conference room sealed shut.

A Kimoyo bead had been placed on the only empty seat. It had accepted Tony’s fingerprint. Sensing the meeting was about to commence, the symbols engraved onto the bead lit up. T’Challa’s hologram wore a solemn expression as it materialised into view. The Wakandan monarch had gifted Tony the bead as a gesture of good will. It had been the only way Tony could reach him.

With the team complete, Stephen stood from his seat. “At the dawn of the universe there was nothing. Then the universe exploded, and six elemental crystals were forged from the Big Bang. These Infinity Stones each control an essential aspect of existence,” Stephen said as projections of the Infinity Stones tinged the conference room with dazzling colour. “Power. Reality. Soul.” The Infinity Stones rotated as Stephen named them. “Space.” Stephen pointed at the glowing cube sitting on the table before Loki. “Mind.” He gestured to the containment unit embossed with Stark Industries logo. “And Time.” Stephen touched the amulet hanging from his neck. The Eye of
Agamotto blinked open, revealing an emerald iris. The green light briefly suppressed the other colours. Stephen closed the Eye when everyone got a good look.

“This is the threat we’ve been drilling for: Thanos,” Stephen continued. “He is merciless. He invades planets, takes what he desires, and slaughters half the population. He sent the Chitauri. If he gathered all six Infinity Stones, he could destroy life on a scale hitherto undreamt of.”

“Within days he’s destroyed Xandar, a civilisation more advanced than ours to get the Power Stone. He killed half of Asgard for the Space Stone. It’s with us now,” Tony pointed at the glowing cube, “along with two others. He’s going to come, and when he does, we’ll be ready.”

“I suppose you have a plan,” Natasha said.

Tony gestured to Stephen, who regrouped the projection of the Infinity Stones according to ownership. He mounted the purple and red stones on a golden gauntlet. “Thanos is guaranteed to possess Power and Reality. Earth has the rest save for Soul. These stones are immensely powerful objects. Only those with anatomy equally powerful can wield their raw form. Lesser beings face dire consequences, which is why over the course of millennia, vessels have been made to mediate the side effects.”

“Until this point, no one could use more than one at a time,” Tony said. “Odin returned the Mind Stone to Earth for that very reason, but it’s not like Thanos to play by the rules.” Tony gestured to the Infinity Gauntlet with two filled slots and four more empty. “With this glove he can control all six. The only way we can stop him, is if we keep the rest out of his reach. We need to gather the Infinity Stones before he does.”

The room was silent. Stephen paused for the weight of the situation to sink in before continuing. “Aside from Thor and Loki, we are all human. The more powerful the being, the more powerful the stone. Without a superior vessel like the gauntlet, mortals can command half the stone’s energy at best.” Stephen plucked the lonesome Soul Stone out of the air. “We must have four to tip the balance.”

“But a person can only use one at a time,” Rhodey said.

“Exactly,” Tony said. “This is going to require team work. Those who have used an Infinity Stone before wield their chosen rock. The rest of us go to town on his army. We wanna separate Thanos from his glove.”

“Is there a way to harness more than half of the stone’s energy?” Bruce asked.


Just like how Stephen and Vision had sent me back. Tony thought. Bruce was taken aback by the answer.

“We don’t trade lives,” Steve said.

“No one’s saying it’ll come to that,” Tony asserted. “Our job is to make sure it doesn’t come to that.”

“Our job is to protect Earth. The wielder should be prepared,” Stephen said. He pretended not to see Tony’s glare. “Now first thing’s first, who will use the Mind Stone?”

“I will.”
“I’ll do it,” Tony and Steve said at the same time.

“Rogers, this isn’t the time to play hero. Pick your fights.” Tony placed a hand on the case containing the Mind Stone and pulled it toward him.

Steve rose from his seat and placed his hand on the other side. “Exactly, no one is experienced except Loki, and he has the Tesseract.” Steve mulled over Stephen’s words. “The more powerful the being, the more powerful the stone. I have the Super Soldier Serum at full strength.”

Before Tony would pile facts in his favour, Stephen interjected. “He’s right. Physical strength can’t be supplemented by technology.” Stephen turned to Tony. “He has the strongest body out of all of us.”

“What about me?” Peter spoke for the first time since he’d greeted Tony and Stephen. He raised his hand and got out of his seat. “I’m pretty strong.”

“You sit down,” Tony said.

“How about the Hulk?” Bruce asked.

“Sorry Bruce.” Stephen shook his head. “We need someone in full control of their actions. An accident with a stone would be catastrophic. You and Thor are our heavy hitters. You are more useful without the stone.”

“Ah, to hell with it all. I’ll do it.” Bucky stood too.

“No one’s sacrificing themselves!” Tony yelled. The room came to a halt. Tony tried to suppress the tremble in his chest, but it was too strong. Images from a frozen wasteland resurfaced in his mind. Stephen placed a hand on his back. Tony took a deep breath and plucked the projection of the Soul Stone out of Stephen’s grasp. “This is our key to victory.” He held the tiny orange rock. It shimmered between his fingers. The projection wasn’t real, but it possessed a phantom weight. “If we don’t have four out of six it won’t matter who uses what. Thanos is a Titan. That means he’s immortal. He doesn’t age past his prime and is invulnerable to most forms of damage.”

“Would an Infinity Stone kill him?” Clint asked.

“Perhaps.” A booming voice echoed through the room. It caught the attention of those who’d gathered around the Mind Stone. “But I know something that definitely will,” Thor said. The God of Thunder sat beside his brother at the opposite end of the table. He’d recovered from his injuries two days prior, but the hardest wounds to heal were the ones no eye could see. “When I fought Thanos, he shattered Mjolnir. Mjolnir was not designed to kill. There is a place in the Nine Realms: Nidavellir.”

“Now you’re just making words up,” Bucky said.

“All words are made up,” Thor said with a straight face. “Nidavellir is the realm of Dwarves. They are the best smiths in the galaxy. Only Eitri can make me the weapon I need.”

“What kind of weapon?” Steve asked.

“The Thanos killing kind.”

“Yeah that’s great, except we’ve got a problem,” Tony said with one hand still holding the containment unit. “The Bi-Frost is gone. How are you going to get there? Anything Earth has is too slow.”
“With this.” Loki raised the Tesseract. His voice was hoarse, but the swelling on his neck has subdued enough for him to speak. His skin was again Asgardian pink, though without the rich blue’s mediation, the blackish bruise appeared all the more daunting. “Nidavellir is far, but I know its location. I can plot a course and make a series of jumps. If fate should have it, we will be back before Thanos arrives.”

All eyes in the room fell on Tony. It was moments like these that reminded Tony of the changes he had made. Not every Avenger might agree with his decisions, but they nonetheless respected them. He was the undisputed leader. His team was waiting for his input. Tony took in everyone who’d gathered. They were still faced with gruelling and perhaps impossible odds, but at least this time, no one would have to do it alone.

“All right. Thor, Loki, forge this weapon. Take the Tesseract. Stephen, Peter, Bruce and I will stay in the sanctum with the Time Stone. Our priority is to locate Soul.” Tony gave Steve one more glance and begrudgingly let go of the containment unit. “The rest of us guard the Mind Stone. Your Highness,” Tony turned to T’Challa’s hologram, “I know this is a lot to ask for, but if the Net is not enough and all hell breaks loose, Wakanda is the only place that’ll stand a chance against Thanos’ army.”

T’Challa, who had been observing the meeting nodded. “I’d given you my word that when this day comes, Wakanda will fight. Come, we will discuss the details when the Avengers arrive.”

Steve took the containment unit. As he walked around the table, he and Stephen shared a long, cold look. “Guard it with your life,” Stephen said.

“Nothing will happen to it. Not while I’m still standing,” Steve replied.

With T’Challa’s permission, Stephen opened a portal directly into the palace. The Dora Milaje eyed the amber opening with concern. Huge security risk, Tony knew, but this was no time for sensitivities. Bucky gave Tony a fist bump when he passed by, which brought a smile to Tony’s lips. Sam lingered by when Rhody hugged Tony goodbye. The two of them had bonded over shared experiences in the Air Force. The master assassins left with a stiff nod. Tony watched half of his team cross the threshold and silently wished them luck.

When the portal closed, Bruce left to place his belongings in his room. The compound had been revamped since his last visit. Stephen went with him to show him the way. They had a long night ahead of them. Each second they didn’t have the Soul Stone was another Thanos had to get it. The Asgardians left for a final meal before journeying across the galaxy. They’d need the energy, especially Loki.

Tony was left with Peter in the conference room. He looked at the boy who’d barely turned seventeen. Peter had just sat through his first Avengers meeting, and it was the biggest threat Earth had ever faced. Tony stepped up to Peter. He extended his arm like a blade and tapped Peter on the right shoulder, and then on the left. “Alright kid, you are an Avenger now.” Peter stared wide-eyed back at Tony. His excitement was unmistakable. “But don’t think that means you have a free pass,” Tony quickly followed up. “Stick to the plan and fall back when I tell you to.”

“But—”

“No buts! Or else you’re off.”

“Fine,” Peter shrugged, “I can work with that.”

“Yes you can?”
“Yeah.”
“Good.”
“Okay.”

Tony and Peter stared at each other. Tony sighed. “I know no one likes having another guy stand over them. You’ll gain experience with time, but when it comes to avenging you only get one shot.” His voice was fast and continuous, like he was defending himself. Tony cringed. That was bad mentoring one-on-one. Why were these things so hard?

“That’s okay. I know you’re looking out for me.” Peter beamed. “Thanks Tony.” He walked away with a bounce in his step. Before the doors to the conference room closed, Tony heard a suppressed exclaim.

“I’m an Avenger!”

Tony snickered. The kid never failed to get a laugh out of him. The tension drained a little from his chest. Tony chose a seat at random. He took in the empty room. Some of the Avengers, like Natasha and Clint had come and left without leaving a trace. Others, like Rhodey and Bruce had steaming cups of beverages on coasters before their seat. They could do this. Tony told himself. They, the Avengers, were strong enough to handle any challenge Thanos could throw at them.

Tony soaked up three full seconds of tranquillity, then the alarm began to blare. The compound was coloured red by flashing lights. Mark Fifty engulfed Tony with nanoparticles. Peter ran back into the room.

“Sir,” Jarvis said as soon as the HUD was up. “Permission to deploy the World Security Net. Our satellite has detected foreign presence above New York City.”

Chapter End Notes

So guys, I've got good news and bad news. Over the past week, I've succumbed to a terrible flu. My fever is starting to improve, but I've been coughing my lungs out. Anything I've been writing is jibberish and I'm behind schedule for my next update. Sadly I'll have to skip an update next week. At first I was going to tough it out like last time, but I didn't want the quality of my chapters to suffer... We are about to enter the juicy part of the IW arc. I know I'll need all my brain cells to do the story justice.

Good news is I still have a very clear direction in terms of where I want to take this series. I have everything outlined, with the chapters broken down and ready to go. *Shakes my fist at this stupid virus. Leave me alone, dammit.* The next update will be on the 14th of October. Rest assured, there might be a week's gap, but I'm definitely coming back.

The second good news is as of last night, Anew has officially reached 10,000 kudos!! I honestly can not believe my eyes. (I've probably said this twenty times now.) I began writing Anew with zero expectations fuelled by nothing but my bitterness from Civil War. I still remember celebrating my first 2000 kudos like there was no tomorrow. Now it's at 10,000! This is such an amazing milestone for me, and to celebrate, I'll write a bonus chapter for Anew somewhere down the line. (When I'm not coughing
my lungs out) I'd like to say another huge THANK YOU to everyone who has followed the story up until this point. You guys are what keeps everything going.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 18

Quill didn’t know how he got into this situation, nor did he know how to get out of it.

The Guardians had been cruising through space with their android guest. Rocket had offered to refresh his batteries and fix any malfunctions; with additional charges, of course. Quill didn’t think his owner would look forward to seeing that bill. Everything had been going swimmingly. They reached the Milky Way. Yondu had abducted Quill too long ago for him to feel nostalgic for his home galaxy, but it was nice to see it again, even if it was just a sector of virgin space with planets that hadn’t yet been bled dry of resources.

The Homo sapiens of Earth was considered as an intelligent species, though only third-tier. They hadn’t joined the galactic community and were at their early stages of extra-terrestrial colonisation. They probably still thought they were alone in the universe. Quill watched the blue and green sphere enlarge beyond the Milano’s windscreen. Normally, being this close to the planet would trigger an automated message. The message would firmly request the unregistered ship to dock at a designated location then await inspection. Depending on the planet’s current political or geological state, they might be denied landing altogether, but this was Earth. Quill received no such message, so he kept going.

It was possible that Earth’s communication frequency didn’t match their own. Their unauthorised landing would be considered a threat. Quill was confident the Milano could blast through whatever primitive technology Earth had; the ship had danced with Sovereign fleets and came out on top. Therefore, one could imagine his surprise when the serene planet suddenly spat out a matrix of red and gold orbs.

They assaulted the Milano from every direction; some came from the planet’s surface and some from the surrounding satellites. They’d waited until the Milano was sandwiched between Earth and the satellites to shed their camouflage. Quill turned his ship around, but it was too late. The orbs had assumed formation and deployed an energy barrier. They reminded Quill of the Star Blasters of Nova Corps: a fleet of individual ships that could interlock and form a blockade. Except the Star Blasters kept enemies out. These red and gold orbs were trapping the Milano within. The Guardians could neither advance nor retreat.

“The field’s frying our sensors!” Gamora yelled over the noise of Drax manning the submachine gun. “Drax, cut it out! The bullets are ricocheting back onto us!”

Groot’s game made another infuriating beep, but even Rocket was too busy smashing the ship’s controls to scold him. “Quill, I thought you said your people were ‘chill’!”

“They are!” Quill shouted.

“I can’t hear you over the sound of getting our asses kicked!”
“The orbs are exerting their own gravitational pull.” Gamora fingers skittered across the keyboard. “They’re trying to wrench us apart!”

Quill mumbled a curse. The encounter had exceeded his wildest expectations. He’d seen the state Earth was in when he left. How did they come up with tech like this in such a short amount of time? They’d gone from first beginning space exploration to trapping a Xandarian ship within fifty years. The growth rate was unnatural.

Quill took control of the ship’s cameras and zoomed in on the orbs. He’d taken out a few with precision strikes, but there were thousands more. The modules that generated their plasmic prison were small, each no bigger than an infant’s head. Coated in metallic paint, the orbs were spaced four to five feet apart. They were each powered by a glowing reactor. It occurred to Quill that he had a carbon copy of it inside his ship. “Time to be useful,” Quill said to the android. “If we go up you go up with us.”

The android walked up to Quill’s pilot seat. “Searching for signal…” it said. “Connection established.” After an ominous pause, the android jumped back and lifted both of his repulsors.

“Who are you and why do you have my guy?” A foreign voice boomed in the hull of the Milano.

Gamora had kept an eye on the android since the orbs deployed. She drew her blade and left the cockpit. The other Guardians followed. “Whoa—everybody chill the fuck out.” Quill raised his arms. There were two taser webs hidden up his sleeve. He took measured steps and slowly inched forward, spreading his fingers apart so the android could see there was nothing in his hands. “We bring him home and this is the thanks we get?”

The android’s head tilted to the side. “We lost him to the Chitauri; that was six years ago. Now Xandar goes up in flames, Thanos has rock: purple, and you wanna sneak past our defences. Coincidence? I think not.” His repulsors glowed white hot. Quill froze at the new-found information.

“Thanos destroyed Xandar?” Gamora asked. Quill was thankful that Rocket had insisted on rigging their guest up with a translator.

“Nu-uh, me first. I asked two questions. Who are you people?” the android pressed.

“We are the Guardians of the Galaxy,” Quill said.

“That’s a fake organisation.”

“Hey!”

“Tony…if I may.” Another man joined the conversation. His voice was deeper. The second man muttered his words slower than the first. “I’m going to ask this once, and once only: what master do you serve?”

“What master do I serve…” Quill mimicked mockingly. “What am I supposed to say, Jesus?”

“You’re from Earth?” the first voice asked.

“I’m not from Earth. I’m from Missouri.”

“Yeah, that’s on Earth, dipshit.”

The second voice let out a long-suffering sigh. Quill could envision the eye roll. The energy barrier
that had taken the Milano hostage subsided, and after another heartbeat, the orbs retreated. The android lowered his repulsors. Quill could hear muted chatter from the other end, the two men talking among themselves.

“Alright, you can come in. We’ll chat face-to-face. Jarvis is sending over co-ordinates, but let me make this clear…” The first voice paused for dramatic effect. It was Quill’s turn to roll his eyes. “If you so much as step a toe out of line, we’ll shoot you straight out of the sky.”

Tony took a large swig of coffee and willed his headache to go away. Being the little bastard that it was, the throbbing pain intensified instead. The day was turning out to be very eventful. He looked toward his extra-terrestrial guests. There was a green alien, a grey alien, an alien with bug-like antennas, a talking racoon, and a frickin tree. Misery loved company. At this point, Tony was no longer surprised at what life could throw him.

Their gate-crashing, gun-slinging, profanity-shouting guests had made quite the entrance. Deploying the Net was no covert affair. The false alarm was bound to make evening news. Though that wasn’t Tony’s problem. The Avengers had a PR team for a reason. He had more important things to worry about.

After a thorough investigation of the alien spacecraft, a background check on Quill, and Jarvis reviewing the lost Legionnaire’s encounter recordings, Tony concluded that these ‘Guardians of the Galaxy’ had been telling the truth. They really did stumble upon the lost Legionnaire and decided to bring him home.

Tony wouldn’t say there was trust between them yet, but at least there was no animosity. Tony had worked with less before. They might even share similar goals, if their mutual dislike of Thanos was anything to go by. With a potential alliance in mind, Tony paid the Guardians for their efforts, decontaminated them, and granted them access to the rest of the Avengers Compound.

Tony finished the remainder of his coffee and stashed the cup in the dishwasher. He’d go for a second serve, but being in a committed relationship meant there was always someone hellbent on duping his coffee with camomile tea. Quill was raiding the fruit bowl on the kitchen island. “This uph deliphous,” Quill said through a mouthful of mush. “I havphn’t tasted an apple in dephades.” He stashed two plums in his pocket.

“Careful, Quill. You’re one sandwich away from fat.” Rocket laughed as Quill blew air into his fist and slowly raised his middle finger.

The remainder of Tony’s guests were seated along the common area’s L-shaped couch. Bruce, Thor, and Loki shared the smaller three-seater. Tony joined Stephen on the daybed, where Peter was perched on the armrest. While Tony had been preparing his mandatory pre-doomsday beverage, the kid had an interesting conversation with the Guardians’ own bug-themed hero. Mantis took an immediate liking to Peter, something about him being positive and full of love.

“The entire time I knew Thanos, he only ever had one goal,” Gamora said as Tony joined the
circle. “To bring balance to the universe by wiping out half of all life. He used to kill people planet by planet, massacre by massacre.”

“Including my own,” Drax said.

“If he gets his hands on all six Infinity Stones, he can do it with a snap of his fingers.” Gamora raised her hand. The crisp snap pierced through the room. “Just like this.”

“Which is why we need to stop him,” Tony said. “He’d come too close to snatching the Tesseract. His next stop is Knowhere. After that, he’s coming straight to Earth. This will be the fight to end all fights.”

Gamora asked. “If only we’d known sooner. It’s too late to go after the Reality Stone now. Thanos’ fleet can outpace most. Facing him with two Infinity Stones and no backup is suicide.”

“You seem to know a great deal about Thanos,” Thor said between bites of mac and cheese. Having been halfway through his meal when the alarm sounded, he brought it with him.

“Gamora…is the daughter of Thanos…” Drax said.

“Oh boy.” Rocket sighed.

The smiled faded from Thor’s lips. “Your father destroyed my home.” Thor rose from his seat. Loki stood too. He placed a hand on Thor’s shoulder. The firm grasp forced Thor to sit back down.

“Stepfather, technically. She hates him as much as you do.” Quill circled the group until he came to stand behind Gamora. He placed one hand on the couch’s backrest and lifted the other to take another bite off the half-eaten apple.

Not as stupid as he looks, Tony noted.

Thor considered the information. He eventually nodded in understanding. Thor set aside the mac and cheese bowl and covered Loki’s hand with his own. Loki grimaced. He tried to withdraw his hand from Thor’s shoulder, but Thor’s grasp was tight. “Unhand me, you moron,” Loki whispered.

“Families can be tough,” Thor said. “My brother and I never got along, but he is all I have left. We are about to embark on an epic quest. It is at Nidavellir where we will forge a new weapon to defeat Thanos.”

“Nidavellir is real? Seriously?” Rocket jumped onto the coffee table to stand eye to eye with Thor. “That place is a legend! They make the most powerful, terrific weapons to ever torment the universe! I would very much like to go there, please!”

“The rabbit is correct,” Thor boomed.

“Rabbit?” Rocket squinted.

Peter furrowed his brows. He turned to Tony and the two of them shared a look. Don’t question it.

Tony attempted telepathy. Peter got the message and returned his attention to the conversation.

“I assume you are the captain, sir?” Thor asked.

“You are very perceptive,” Rocket said.

“You seem like a noble leader. Will you join us on our quest to Nidavellir?”
“Let me just ask the captain. Oh, wait a second, it’s me! Yeah, I’ll go.”

“Wonderful.”

“Ah, except that I’m the captain,” Quill said.

“And teleportation requires energy.” Loki pinched the bridge of his nose. Tony could feel his pain. His own headache was being a handful and a half. Loki turned to Thor. “We gain nothing by bringing others.”

“Say, how do you plan on getting there anyway? Do you have a ship?” Rocket asked.

Loki looked to Stephen, who nodded in support. “With the Tesseract. We will make a series of jumps, and rest on civilised planets in our path.”

“That’s gonna waste you days,” Rocket said. “We’ve got advanced FTL. It’ll drive even as you sleep.”

“No one’s taking my ship!” Quill said.

“Relax, Quill. We are only taking the pod.”

“Which is a part of my ship.”

“Let’s concentrate here,” Tony said. “Ship or no ship, there’s still a good chance you won’t make it back in time. Our priority is to find the Soul Stone.”

“Tony,” Thor began, “during my time traversing the Nine Realms, I’ve never once encountered any lead on its location, not even a rumour. No one knows where it is. For four years we’ve tried. It’s too late.”

“That’s not true.”

The clipped statement caught the attention of the room. Tony turned to Gamora, who’d pursed her lips after she muttered those words. “What do you mean?”

Gamora looked away. She considered her next words with great care. The pause stretched uncomfortably long until she finally met Tony’s gaze. “The Soul Stone is on Vormir.” Tony was taken aback by the certainty in her answer. The Guardians gasped at the revelation too.

“Who else knows?” Stephen asked.

“Not Thanos,” Gamora said. “I’d been tasked to find it. I searched and searched, journeyed to far ends of the galaxy, upturned every crevice. I once held the map to the Soul Stone in my hands and I burned it to ash.”

“There’s not a moment to lose.” Tony stood. He looked to Stephen, and then to Gamora. “We need that rock. If Thanos gets a third, it’s all over.”

“And my brother and I will go to Nidavellir as planned,” Thor said.

“The way I see it, we got two ships and a large assortment of morons.” Rocket jumped down from the coffee table and tapped on a device strapped to his wrist. “So me and Groot will go with the god man, and the morons will go to Vormir to try get the Soul Stone. Cool? Cool.”

“So cool.” Thor smiled. He stood again. This time, Loki didn’t stop him.
Tony tossed Loki an earpiece. He didn’t bother to give Thor one. The God of Thunder need only use his powers to fry the delicate communication device. “Stay in touch,” Tony said to Loki. The trickster replied with a mischievous grin. The earpiece would likely malfunction outside the Solar System, but limited range was better than nothing. They’d need to contact each other after they return from their tasks.

“For the record…” Quill said to Rocket as the racoon was leaving the room, “I know that you’re only going with him because it’s where Thanos isn’t.”

“You know, you really shouldn’t talk that way to your captain, Quill.” Rocket smirked. “Come on, Groot. Put that game down. You’ll rot your brain.” Groot stood from the couch and followed Rocket without taking his eyes off the game. Tony watched them disappear down the corridor. He was struck by the realisation that out of the four destined for Nidavellir, none of them was human.

Had it really been six years since aliens first appeared in this timeline, and thirteen years since the Battle of New York?

“Peter, Bruce, stay in the sanctum with Wong until we return,” Stephen said as Tony was spacing out. “He’ll be on portal duty if you are needed elsewhere in a hurry.”

Bruce nodded. “We’ll guard New York while you’re gone.”

“You can count on us,” Peter said. Tony gave Peter a pat on the shoulder. He could tell Peter wanted to come, but instead of putting up an argument, Peter kept his promise and headed for the sanctum without fuss.

Tony and Stephen packed lightly. It was meant to be a short trip and the Guardian’s ship was well stocked. The Milano, as Quill introduced, was a customised M-ship, and a faithful recreation of the original after it was destroyed in the Battle of Xandar. Tony and Stephen dumped their bags in a spare cabin and joined the rest of the Guardians in the hull. Tony ran his fingers down a bundle of electric wiring, exposed for easy maintenance.

“Nu-uh, I know that look.” Quill held a finger up to Tony. “Don’t go around taking her apart. Rocket’s our technician, the rest of us know basic repairs, but if you mess her up, we are grounded until he returns.”

Tony made an extra effort to flick the bundle aside. The nail of his index finger struck the matted material. A sharp clack ensued. Quill folded his arms. “He’s your techie? I gotta buy him a drink then.” Tony resisted the urge to fiddle with what was behind those metal plates. No matter, sooner or later, the Milano would tell him all her secrets.

“Plotting course to Vormir,” Gamora said from her pilot seat. “We’ll leave the Milky Way and head for the nearest jump point. We can get in twelve jumps before we have to fly the rest.”

“ETA?” Stephen took in the map of the stars.

“Eighteen hours.” Gamora enlarged the course for all to see. Amidst the stars, a bright yellow line zigzagged across the galaxy. At certain points, the line would terminate and reappear in the distance, light years away. A dark, lifeless planet resided at the end of their path.

Tony shivered at the sight. Over the years he’d developed somewhat of a sixth sense for danger. The darkened pixels sent shivers down his back. Nothing good would come out of this visit. A nonsensical part of Tony told him he should turn back now, but he so rarely got what he bargained for. Tony looked to Stephen, who regarded the course map with grim determination.
They’d just have to pull through this one too.

Chapter End Notes

I’m back and 95% cured! Thanks for being patient with me. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
For the first time since as long as he could remember, Tony was left with nothing to do.

The Milano was set on auto-pilot as the Guardians retired for the evening. Faced with an empty room, Tony documented the ship’s control systems then returned to the cabin he and Stephen shared. Stephen had changed out of his sorcerer robes. He hovered cross-legged on the bed as waves of green light pulsed from the Eye of Agamotto. The door slid shut with a soft *whoosh*. It didn’t distract the Sorcerer Supreme.

*Soon-to-be Sorcerer Supreme*, Tony mentally corrected, just like Stephen had when Tony brought up the title before. Stephen shared a distant but respectful relationship with his predecessor. He’d continue to refuse the title until he was confident he was her equal.

Tony grabbed his bag of toiletries and dashed to the bathroom. Thankfully the tiny compartment was empty. Tony took a brief shower, changed into sleepwear, then got side-tracked studying the ship’s water reclamation system. He returned with a head full of notes. Stephen remained rooted to his spot. That was…unusual. Seeing multiple futures at once was taxing. Stephen favoured short but frequent trips. Perhaps he’d chosen a timeline to view in detail. They were so close to the end game after all.

As Tony stashed away his toiletries, light from the Eye of Agamotto subsided. The strips of metal framing the iris shifted, and the Time Stone was sealed safely away. Stephen opened his eyes.

“Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?” Tony asked. “Back home you said it wasn’t the time. Now we’re on an alien spaceship, headed for the Soul Stone. Are we on the right track?”

“Yes.” Stephen lowered himself and padded over to Tony. “I’d have intervened if we weren’t.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Tony lifted his chin. His gaze locked with Stephen’s.

“I…can’t tell you that.” Stephen tried to squeeze past Tony, but Tony was having none of it. He planted himself between Stephen and the door and dared Stephen to move him.

“Why not? Isn’t it safer if we all know our roles?”

“A person reacts differently when they are unaware.” Stephen sighed. He returned to the foot of the bed and sat. “I’ve said aloud the outcome before. All those futures had failed.”

Tony joined Stephen. The bed was narrow, barely wide enough for two. Not that it mattered. Tony suspected he wouldn’t be getting any rest tonight. “How much can you tell me? Is there an ambush?”

“There’ll be no battle.”
Somehow the good news didn’t reassure Tony. Stephen had said there’d be no fighting, so no casualties, but Tony couldn’t shake the sinking feeling from his chest. “Something else is waiting,” the thought slipped from his mouth. “Something worse.”

Stephen regarded him with a sentiment Tony couldn’t quite place. The sorcerer broke into a smile. He leaned backward and fell onto the bed. Stephen beckoned for Tony to join him. Tony sighed in exasperation, but Stephen held up his arms and the fondness in his eyes was too much. Stephen had worked himself to the bone. How could Tony deny him such a small act of indulgence?

Tony fell back too. He landed in Stephen’s waiting arms. Tony rested his head on the curve of Stephen’s collarbone, and the two of them lay there, on the narrow bed, staring at the cabin’s grey ceiling.

“We never did have that wedding,” Stephen said.

“We’ll hold it, as soon as this mess is over.” Tony took Stephen’s left hand into his own, stacking the rings on top of each other. The stone on Tony’s band twinkled brightly. Had it been two years since they got engaged? Time had a habit of sneaking past when one wasn’t looking. Following their return from the Great Barrier Reef, they’d planned feverishly for the first month or two. Then problems arose with the Net and Stephen began giving lessons at Kamar-Taj. Months on the calendar fluttered past like a stack of paper in the wind. Now Thanos was days from knocking on their front door. They were almost out of time.

“Yeah,” Stephen rasped. Tony couldn’t see his face, but he heard the tremble in his fiancé’s voice.

“Are you alright?” Tony tried to right himself, but Stephen pinned him to his chest.

“Yes. Just…stay with me.”

Tony himself had said that countless times. He might not know what troubled Stephen, but he knew the turmoil Stephen must be going through. Tony recalled what he’d felt when he had been the one making those requests. Fear, hopelessness, dread…maybe a hint of paranoia too. None of them could guarantee that they’d save the world. All they could do was give their best, but what if their best wasn’t enough?

It had to be. The Avengers were humanity’s first and last line of defence. If they failed, then the shield around Earth would vanish. The thought alone brought unbearable pressure. It pushed Tony to the brink of madness. Tony was certain he hadn’t cracked only because he had someone by his side. Not just a spouse, either, but a partner. Someone who was his equal. Someone he could entrust with the world he fought so hard to protect. Someone that could offer him solace after he shed the armour of Iron Man and became just Tony Stark.

That was the way they worked. Staying by each other’s side, keeping the other person sane. It was so deceptively simple, yet over the years, the small day-to-day moments added up. What began as superficial attraction had grown into a bond so unbreakable, Tony wondered how he’d come so far on his own. He tried to remember how things had been when the lab wasn’t configured for two. He tried to remember sitting through those Avenger meetings, knowing no one watched his back without reserve. He tried to remember being confronted by the press, knowing that he’d have to come to his own defence. Tony had grown used to Stephen’s companionship, and he suspected that Stephen had grown used to his too.

They eventually shifted under the covers. On top of a bed meant for one, the cabin was outfitted with a flimsy heat-reflecting membrane. Tony wasn’t cold, but he was used to the weight of a quilt. Now more than ever he was thankful to have Stephen by his side.
Despite having dimmed the lights, Stephen regarded him with an intensity Tony couldn’t ignore. Tony shifted under the weight of it. “I’m sorry,” Stephen said.

“What for?” Tony didn’t like the sound of finality in Stephen’s voice.

“I can’t seem to learn my lesson.” Stephen’s eyes had always been the purest shade of blue. Under the glow of the arc reactor, Tony was reminded of his aqua coloured home world. “I thought I’d lost you before. My biggest regret had been I didn’t spend enough time with you.”

“We spent time.” Tony was quick to reassure Stephen, but Stephen only laughed. It was a small, sad sound.

“Stolen moments. We never revisited Venice. I knew how badly you wanted to return.”

“We agreed to visit the places we haven’t been first.” Tony propped himself up with his elbow. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” Stephen muttered, but as the seconds passed more words trickled from his lips. “I was just thinking about how I had wasted all this time, when the answer was right in front of me.” He regarded Tony with the same intensity. When it became clear that Tony expected a better answer, Stephen pulled Tony back under the covers.

“Know this, Tony,” Stephen said as he cupped Tony’s face with shaking hands. “You won’t just change the world. You are going to change the universe.”

Somehow, after enough time had passed, Tony fell asleep with Stephen’s arm draped over him. He got three hours at most, but that was three hours more than he’d expected. The crew converged forty-five minutes before landing. The atmosphere was tense; not even Quill was in the mood for jokes.

The Milano landed on a large dune, amidst pools of dark liquid. It had been the only place flat enough for the M-ship to land. Gamora pointed toward the barren mountains in the distance. They’d have to complete the journey on foot. Drax and Mantis stayed with the ship for the very likely scenario that the ground team would need extraction, leaving Tony, Stephen, Gamora, and Quill to hunt for the stone.

The Cloak of Levitation swayed behind Stephen as his boots sank into fine sands. Tony trekked beside him. They walked where the terrain was flat and flew where there were deep chasms. Quill and Gamora relied on their rocket boosters. With the help of technology, they reached the mountains before the day was up.

The four of them climbed the snowy peaks. Mark Sixty insulated against the cold, but the winds was cutting on Tony’s cheeks. Tony rolled his eyes. Of course, the Soul Stone couldn’t just be handed to them with a flyer. Here you go, sir. User manual’s in the bag. Enjoy your trip home. We hope you visit again!
Quill was shivering in his jacket. Stephen cast a warming spell on the group; the cold was slowing them down. The mountain path was narrow and slippery with snow. They trod in a single file. A cave awaited them at the end of the path. The surrounding rocks were pointy and shaped like the fangs of an open jaw.

Stephen halted immediately after they entered the cave. Tony came within an inch of burying his face into the back of Stephen’s head. The opening was around the bend, but a figure stood—no, floated between them and the exit. “If you plan to suck happiness from people, we are a long way from Azkaban,” Tony quipped.

The figure, draped in black from head to toe, lowered into view. His cloak was frayed from exposure to the elements. A large hood obscured his features. “Welcome Tony, son of Howard. Stephen, son of Eugene. Gamora, daughter of Thanos. Peter, son of Ego.”

“You know us?” Quill asked.

“It is my curse to know all who journey here.” The figure’s voice was rough. He spoke slowly, like he’d almost forgotten how. Tony suspected that he didn’t get visitors often.

“Where is it?” Tony stepped forward. “The Soul Stone?”

“You should know it exacts a terrible price.”

“I’m ready.”

“We all think that at first.” The figure removed its hood. “We are all wrong.”

Tony drew in a sharp breath. He’d seen this man before, on faded photographs and classified files. Only back then Steve Rogers hadn’t been frozen for seventy years, and the man’s face was still plump with flesh. “So being a Nazi didn’t work out for you. How’d you wind up here?”

“A lifetime ago, I, too, sought the stones.” Johann Schmidt’s words pulled at his scared features. His missing nose was a harrowing sight. “I even held one in my hand.”

“Yeah, the Tesseract.” The first Infinity Stone known to S.H.I.E.L.D. A stone Tony’s father had studied.

“But it cast me out, banished me here. Guiding others to a treasure I cannot possess.” Schmidt turned on his heels. He led them through the cave and between two square pillars so tall they pierced the clouds. A cliff severed their path. Tony leaned over the steep drop. Through thin slivers of clouds, he could see a ring etched into the stone plane beneath. “What you see lies in front of you. As does what you fear.”

“What’s this?” Gamora asked. She, too, was leaning over the cliff.

“Careful.” Quill took hold of Gamora’s hand, making sure she didn’t lose her footing.

“The price,” Schmidt said. “Soul holds a special place among the Infinity Stones. You might say it has a certain wisdom.”

“What does it want?” The longer Tony stared at the ring, the more he was convinced his intuition was right. Being so far from a star, Vormir existed in a perpetual state of dusk. The meagre light colouring the horizon purple failed to reach the ring. The plane of stone was shrouded by an eternal shadow.
“To ensure that whoever possesses it understands its power, the stone demands a sacrifice,” Schmidt paused. Tony turned to face him. Schmidt’s sunken cheeks mirrored the unforgiving landscape. “In order to take the stone, you must lose that which you love. A soul…for a soul.”

The meaning of Schmidt’s words sank in. He had the audacity to look in Stephen’s direction. It lit a fire in Tony’s chest. “Listen, why don’t you cut the crap and tell me what’s really going on. I don’t have time for your games.” Tony augmented his left repulsor into a canon. He aimed the glowing tip at the stone keeper.

Schmidt was unfazed by the turn of events. He turned to Stephen. “Keeper of time, you know which your companion does not. My duty is complete. Retrieve the stone or leave it be, the choice is yours.” Schmidt’s cloak became one with the winds. He dissolved into wisps of black smoke, leaving them to themselves.

“Excuse us,” Stephen said to Quill and Gamora. Who’d returned from the edge of the cliff.

“Ignore that maniac. Solitary confinement took what was left of his sanity.” Tony laughed nervously. The lines of Stephen’s face hardened. Tony’s laughter died as if someone had squeezed it from his windpipe.

“There is no other way,” Stephen said after a stretch of silence so long, time seemed to still. There was a blue shadow under his eyes. He hadn’t gotten a full night’s rest in weeks.

Tony’s heart hammered painfully against his ribcage. “What…what do you mean?”

“Of the billions of futures I saw, our only way to succeed requires you to wield the Soul Stone. This was why I sent you back.” Stephen’s words left no room for doubt. He gave Tony a moment to absorb the facts then struck the final blow. “No one else will do. It has to be you. For half the universe to live, I must die.”

Tony flinched. Pieces of the puzzle fell together. In a matter of seconds, everything made sense. The averted glimpses. The unspoken truths…


“There has to be another way.” Tony could hear the tremble in his voice. Feel the shake in his jaw. He wished it was all a cruel prank, but Stephen would never use his life as a joke. He meant too much to Tony. He knew that. Over the years Tony had taken every opportunity to make that clear.

Tony took a pathetic step toward one he loved most. Stephen had backtracked until he was inches from the drop. “I saw annihilation.” Stephen didn’t beg, but it was close. He removed the Eye of Agamotto from his neck and let it slide to the ground. For the first time since his mentor passed, Stephen willingly separated from the Time Stone. If his words hadn’t been enough to convince Tony of his resolve, this simple gesture did.

Stephen was passing on what he could no longer carry. The Cloak of Levitation was next. The sentient relic retaliated. Its clasps wouldn’t unclip when Stephen tried to take it off, but Stephen was relentless. He tugged and tugged, then resorted to magic to prise it off.

The cloak didn’t know what to do. It faced Stephen as if it couldn’t believe its master had abandoned it. The cloak turned to Tony. When Tony gave no answer, the cloak fled the scene. In a red blur, the cloak disappeared down the path they came from. It couldn’t bear to witness its master’s death. Tony didn’t have the luxury of stepping away. He was the one expected to do the unthinkable.
Stephen’s knuckles were bone white from his grip. “Thanos will come. He will gather the Infinity Stones if we don’t collect them first. This is the only chance we’re going to get. Tony, please. This is no time to be selfish. One life, for the life of trillions in the universe. It’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

Thoughts filled Tony’s mind. He had so much to say, and nothing to say at all. His brain refused to string words into sentences. The thoughts piled on top of each other. They condensed into a single word. “No.”

“You can do this.” Stephen took hold of Tony’s hand and placed it on his chest. “Just close your eyes and… A little push, that’s all it takes.”

“No.” Tony shook his head. He wanted to retract his hand, but Stephen wouldn’t let him.

“Do it, Tony!”

“No!”

“Tony, you have to push me off. I can’t jump by myself. You have to sacrifice me!” Stephen looked at the abyss and took another step back. His boot scraped the edge of the cliff. He tipped backwards.

“Stephen!” Tony shouted. He grabbed Stephen by the front of his robes and yanked him back. He’d pulled so hard Stephen fell in the opposite direction. Stephen landed on top of Tony and the two of them toppled over. Tony was breathing fast. His body couldn’t handle all the oxygen. It went straight to his brain. He clung to Stephen like a lifeline that was lost and found.

“If…if you think,” Tony stammered. Images of what could’ve happened filled his vision. Fear tightened his hold on the man in his arms. Tony’s vision blurred and beads of salty liquid dripped from his eyes. Some slid down his cheeks, some glided past his nose, lips, and fell into his mouth. Tony had never tasted anything more terrible in his life. “If you think I’d kill you for a piece of rock—no, anything, then Stephen Strange, I need to reconsider our involvement, because clearly you don’t know me at all.”

“Please…” Stephen pleaded. Begged. Tony clung to him tighter in response. He wasn’t the only one crying. They stayed on the ground, too broken to move. When Tony was done choking on his own tears, he pulled away from Stephen and lifted them both to their feet.

“You do it.” Tony wiped his eyes dry and pursed his lips. “If it can’t be avoided, and one of us has to go for the other to get the stone… You know everything I do, whereas I can’t do magic at all. With you at the helm, the Avengers can stop Thanos without me.”

“That’s not possible,” Stephen said.

“Or is it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Come on, you know I’m being reasonable.” It was Tony’s turn to approach the drop. Stephen reached out and caught his arm, but Tony shook it free. He ventured to the tip of the cliff. The cold was biting on his face and neck. It froze what was left of the wetness. Stephen raised his hand with the Sling Ring, ready to catch Tony at a moment’s notice. “Let’s just consider all the outcomes—”

“I have considered all the outcomes.”
“What if there’s another way? A better way, where we came out on top sooner? Why does it have to be me? I mean, all I do is mess things up. I only get them right on the second try. You’re clearly the better candidate. You have experience with the Time Stone.” Tony went on. Now that he was no longer paralysed with fear, he pled his case in rapid fire. Stephen kept his sight trained on Tony’s feet. Aside from steely determination, Tony caught a hint of despair. And then the answer came to him. “You can’t do it.”

“…What?” Stephen muttered.

“Sacrifice me.”

All that was audible was the sound of howling winds. The two of them were close. Tony could see white fog escape Stephen’s open mouth. Stephen wanted to say something, to argue, perhaps, but after a while his shoulders sagged. It was as if fighting with Tony had drained the last of his strength.

“You are the one thing that’s kept me going.” Stephen sighed in resignation. “For all these years, I locked myself in the sanctum and peered through the veil of time, hoping to find the one possibility, the one outcome that will lead to salvation. I did it for you. I did it to keep you safe.”

Tony didn’t need a mirror to know his face was a mess of dirt and stains. He scrunched his nose to keep more tears from falling. “Then we’re on the same page.” After his emotions were under control, Tony tapped on the arc reactor. “I installed this thing back in my chest for you. To make sure I’ll never be caught off guard. That whatever the threat is or whenever it comes, I’ll always be ready.” Tony stepped away from the drop. He approached Stephen and dared the sorcerer to look him in the eyes.

“If you can’t push me off this cliff, then you have no right to ask me to do the same.”

Chapter End Notes

So they’re both alive, but at what cost?

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
“Man…that’s some fucked up shit,” Quill muttered. He’d watched Strange backtrack to the edge of the cliff. The events had unfolded so quickly. The sight of two grown men crying like babies should have been embarrassing, but the dull ache in Quill’s chest leeched the humour from him.

“Fools. They’ve made a grave mistake. We will not get this chance again,” Gamora said.

Quill turned to his companion. “Gamora, I know you’ve got this whole galaxy’s most fearsome assassin thing going for you, but you are asking Stark to kill his partner. He’s not a ray of sunshine, but they clearly have a thing.” Gamora averted her gaze. Quill sighed. It must’ve been her training, because she hadn’t meant a word of what she’d said.

“It’s only a matter of time before he finds his way here.” The words left Gamora in a whisper. She didn’t need to specify who ‘he’ was, not when they both knew what was at stake.

“Yeah, no point denying that.” Quill dug around in his pockets, pulling up a stale protein bar. He tore a chunk off it, trying and failing to flush the bitter taste from his mouth.

“Do you think the stone keeper was telling the truth?” Gamora asked.

They were standing twenty feet or so from Stark and Strange. Distant enough to give them privacy, but close enough to lend a hand. Quill looked to the bottom of the cliff. It was a long way down. “Don’t know…must be, if Strange was willing to jump.” Quill’s words confirmed Gamora’s speculations, because she headed for the drop. “Uh…what are you doing?”

“Peter…” Gamora turned to face him. “One life, for the lives of trillions.” She nudged her chin toward Strange. “He has a point.”

“Oh, no no no.” Quill wagged his index finger at Gamora. “We’ve all made some bad decisions before, but this is taking it to another level.”

“Peter—”

“I’m not gonna kill you, not for anything!” Quill’s voice echoed down the cave. He snapped his jaw shut when he realised Stark and Strange were staring. “You can forget about it,” he added as he held out his hand.

Gamora huffed. She considered the drop again, but before she could make another request, Quill walked up and wrapped her hand in his. Despite Gamora’s fierce demeanour, she had a gentle heart. Quill could tell she wasn’t happy with returning empty-handed, but in the end, she allowed him to guide her back to safety.

“We shouldn’t make Thanos’ job easier by reducing our own numbers,” Quill said. Gamora
nodded, though the crease between her brows deepened. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to ask a favour.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“One way or another, the path we are on leads to Thanos.” Gamora’s fuchsia-tinted locks were laden with snow. She retrieved a dual-edged switchblade from her belt. The blade’s hilt was crafted from intricate silverwork. A magnificent red gem rested in the centre of the hilt.

“Which is what these blasters are for.” Quill unzipped his jacket, exposing his utility belt. Gamora levelled him with an unimpressed look. “Uh, I’m sorry. What’s the favour?”

“If things go wrong…” Gamora studied the polished switchblade. She ran her fingers across the red gemstone. “If Thanos gets me. I want you to promise me…you’ll kill me.”

“What?” Quill gasped. On the journey leading up to Vormir, killing Gamora hadn’t been on the top of his to-do list. Now he’d not only been asked once, but twice.

“Thanos doesn’t love anything. He’ll kill and torture and call it mercy, but we have to be certain.” The cold amplified the redness around Gamora’s eyes, or at least that was what Quill told himself. “Thanos cannot know about this stone. He knows the location of five. The Soul Stone is the last out of his reach.”

“In that case I know where it is too.” Quill gestured to Stark and Strange. “They know. Every Guardian knows.”

“Thanos had been the one to assign me this task,” Gamora explained. “He has a twisted amount of faith in me. I am the source of the information. I can lie, pretend that I’d failed my quest, but he is good with getting his way. Just…trust me, and possibly kill me.”

“I mean, I’d like to,” Quill mumbled. He had a habit of talking, but not saying much when he was trying to get out of a situation. “I really would, but you—”

Gamora clasped her hand over Quill’s mouth, cutting off his words. “Swear to me.” There was a glassy sheen over her eyes. “Swear to me on your mother.”

Unable to speak, Quill blinked in response. Gamora knew the place his mother held in his heart. She’d never bring her up if this promise didn’t weigh the same. Gamora removed her hand. Quill gazed into his love’s dark, but bright eyes. They spoke of night skies, adventures, and galaxies far beyond. He might be the captain of the Milano, but he’d follow her anywhere.

“Okay,” Quill promised. He wiped away the droplet that’d fell from Gamora’s eyes. Gamora leaned forward, and her lips touched his. Her hand was warm against his chest. Whatever dangers awaited them, they had this moment to themselves. “But only if you promise to do the same,” Quill said as they parted. “Strategically speaking, he’s gonna want to capture the biggest threat. You’ll be saving me from a world of pain.”

Gamora sighed, but the sadness that had been clouding her features lifted. “You are incapable of being responsible for more than two seconds.”

“I’d say that moment lasted at least ten,” Quill quipped. Gamora let out a small chuckle, which teased a smile out of Quill too. “Let’s get out of here and hope no one has to come back.”

Gamora looked to Stark and Strange, who’d composed themselves and were waiting for them at
the mouth of the cave. “Yeah…let’s hope so.”

Tony often read Stephen’s medical journals for fun. Once upon a time, he came across an issue laying innocently on top of the doctor’s to-be-read pile. Tony had forgotten who penned the article, or which journal it had been featured in, but its message stuck with him until this very day: Anger was never the primary emotion. There was always an underlying cause.

Of course, like everything else in the world, there were two camps bickering over the legitimacy of the theory. Tony didn’t care, because that theory offered a perfect explanation for his current state of mind. The minute he and Stephen had stepped off those snowy peaks, an emotion unexpected but familiar began to simmer in Tony’s ribcage. It intensified until his foot crossed the threshold of their cabin, then all hell broke loose.

“You knew, you bastard. You knew. What kind of person did you take me for?” Tony turned to Stephen as the door of their cabin slid shut. In the safety of the Milano, he didn’t have to worry about Stephen being sacrificed. Tony could cave in and let the anger mask his hurt, fear, and guilt. Anger made things bearable. If he tried hard enough, he could convince himself that anger was all he felt, that the phantom pain of removing, then reinserting the arc reactor was all that caused his chest to ache.

“You knew what it took to get the Soul Stone, the sacrifice. Why did you lead us on a goose chase? Did you think any of us were going to push the other to their death?” Tony stepped away. The thought that Stephen had assumed—no, seen that he’d meet his end at the hands of Tony added insult to injury. In what twisted universe would he have willingly sacrificed the man he loved?

“Tony, I—” Stephen began, but Tony slammed his fist against the wall.

“Save it,” Tony said. His mind was a molten mess. He picked up his Stark pad and made way for the door.

“Where are you going?” Stephen asked.

“Away from this.” Tony gestured to the cabin with Stephen in it. He cursed his inability to ignore the man’s wellbeing. Tony was angry. God, he was so, so angry, but it didn’t change the fact that Stephen needed to rest. The sorcerer was on the verge of collapse. He couldn’t sleep while Tony was throwing a tantrum in his ear. Tony wanted to drill it into Stephen that they were in this together, but all that came out was another indecipherable grunt. “Just get some rest.” Tony left without looking back.

Once he made sure the coast was clear, Tony locked himself in the engine room. He’d planned to spend the trip back documenting the heart of the Milano. It was a design capable of consuming three types of alien fuel. Normally, having unsupervised time with such an elegant work of art would make Tony giddy with joy, but in light of recent events, working was all that kept Tony from falling apart.
So he got to keep Stephen. What did that decision cost? The Soul Stone would remain barred until he was willing to reconsider sacrificing his partner. Back on Vormir, all that had mattered was keeping Stephen alive, but how long would that last after their enemy gathered the remaining the Infinity Stones? Atop those snowy peaks, Thanos had seemed so distant compared to the here and now, but as the speed of FTL travel brought them closer to home, the looming threat was once again pushed to the forefront.

What would he tell his fellow Avengers? Sorry, I couldn’t doom my fiancé, so I chose to doom the rest of the universe instead?

Tony backtracked until he was leaning against a shipping crate. He slid to the floor and buried his face in his hands. His act of selfishness guaranteed that Earth would face Thanos with no more than Space, Mind, and Time. Would that be enough to tip the balance? Or would he be forced to watch the world he treasured end, knowing he had the opportunity to save it, but he let it slide from his grasp?

Tony looked up and registered the oddness of his environment. The foreign contraptions no longer inspired curiosity. Tubes sprawling from the engine distorted, their shadows thin and long like talons emerging from the darkness. Tony shuddered. His connection to Jarvis had been severed when they left Earth. He was alone on an alien spaceship, in a distant sector of the galaxy. No help could reach him.

Before he knew it, Tony was shaking and searching for a way out. His eyes scanned the engine room and spotted the door he’d used to enter. Tony made a beeline for it. He tripped on the steps and slammed against the door. His world spun, his pressing organs together. He needed to escape, but the door remained shut. He tried to claw it open with his fingernails.

It wouldn’t open. Why wouldn’t it open?

Tony failed to recall that he had been the one to program it shut. He fell to the floor, certain that he was done for. He bit into his hand to muffle his scream. Instead of flesh, his teeth touched something hard. This snapped some sense back to him. Tony looked down and saw his engagement ring.

The twinkling stone shone bright in the dim room. The light had been a constant in his life for two years.

He wasn’t alone.

Tony covered the ring with his right hand, feeling the stone’s shape against his palm. He recalled his breathing exercises and followed them until his heart rate slowed. Years of experience in diffusing panic attacks made him good at it. As the heat drained away, Tony rested his head against the cold, metallic door. He remembered who he was, he remembered where he was, and he remembered how to get out.

Tony stayed in the same position until he gathered enough strength to stand. He retrieved his Stark pad and unlocked the door to the outside world. As Tony padded down the corridor, he wondered what Stephen was doing. Was he resting, like he was supposed to? Tony hoped that was the case, but his rational side argued that he’d left Stephen in a bad place. Tony came to a halt outside their cabin. He pressed his ear to the door. Nothing. Maybe Stephen was asleep after all, better not disturb him.

Tony continued down the corridor, reaching the small, makeshift kitchen. He brewed himself a cup of space coffee, a tentative term, since it tasted nothing like the heavenly bitter liquid back home.
Nevertheless, it kept him awake, so he brewed an entire thermos and sat down with it in front of the ship’s largest window. Outside their pressurised hull was a vibrant galaxy, the luminous gas clouds constantly shifting and morphing. It was beautiful, nothing like the colourless void of his nightmares.

“Mind if I have some?” Tony jumped when a voice rang behind him. He turned to find Gamora perched on a stool, her left leg folded before her chest. She was veiled by shadows no darker than the colour around her eyes. It seemed that sleep escaped many of them.

Tony poured Gamora a cup, and the green alien joined him in front of the window. For a while, they both glanced out with vacant stares, looking, but not seeing. Tony wasn’t in the mood for chit-chat. Thankfully, neither was Gamora. He worked on his Stark pad, salvaging what information he’d gathered before his trip down memory lane. Gamora sharpened her knife. They stayed like that until they emptied the thermos.

Forty-five minutes before arrival, the remaining Guardians trickled in. Stephen was the last to appear. He looked even worse for wear. It was just as Tony feared; Stephen hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep. The guilt in Tony’s chest amplified. He should’ve checked, should’ve made sure his partner was okay.

Tony hurried toward Stephen and helped him sit. Stephen was shaking and breathing in short, shallow bursts. “He needs rest.” Tony contemplated if he should carry Stephen back to their cabin.

“I can help…” A thin figured emerged from behind Drax. She was hunching and offered her help by lifting a hesitant hand. Tony vaguely recalled that Mantis could feel the emotions of others.

“She’s good at putting people to sleep,” Quill said. “Had a lot of training with my dad, whom we killed.”

If it wasn’t for Stephen’s pressing state, Tony would’ve done a double take. He carried Stephen back to their cabin. Despite that everyone came, Mantis was the only one who entered. “Lay him on the bed, face up,” she said. Tony followed her instructions.

Admittedly, Tony hadn’t seen much of her. She’d seemed keen to avoid Stephen, whom Tony was joined at the hip with. When they were forced into the same room, she would retreat behind Drax. It all started when they came into accidental contact. She went into a minute-long monologue on how Stephen was filled with ‘dark resolve.’ Tony hadn’t thought much of it then. Dark resolve? Which Avenger wasn’t? Now he wished he’d picked up the bread crumbs sooner.

Mantis hovered her hand over Stephen’s forehead. Her antennas lit up, but before she could proceed, Stephen’s eyes snapped open. Stephen reached out and grabbed Tony’s arm. His movement too fast for someone minutes away from losing consciousness.

“Don’t go,” Stephen rasped. “Please.”

No amount of pretend anger could mask the pain that ripped Tony’s heart in two. He returned Stephen’s touch. “I promise. I’m not going anywhere. Let her help you.”

Stephen let out a relieved sigh and slowly leaned back on the pillow. Just when Tony thought he’d passed out, Stephen nodded. Tony shifted to the side, giving Mantis room to operate. Her antennas light up again, and Stephen’s grip loosened. Tony tightened his own grip, keeping them together in Stephen’s place.

He stayed until the Milano landed. His glasses lit up with signal, and Tony was glad to have Jarvis
back. His faithful AI had downloaded himself into a Legionnaire and was waiting in the hanger with a gurney. Tony transported Stephen onto the gurney with a fluid mat of nanoparticles. Together, they rolled Stephen down to the lab, undressed him, and plugged him into machines that would monitor his condition.

Tony was exhausted when the work was complete. His own lack of sleep caught up. “What am I going to do with you, you stubborn fool,” Tony muttered as he stroked Stephen’s hair. His fingers wandered down, brushing past the streak of grey that had grown wider and more prominent.

The crow’s feet at the corner of Stephen’s eyes had deepened over the years. Tony caught his own reflection on the monitor. Between spikes on the electrocardiogram, he saw puffy eyes, frown lines, and speckles of silver in his beard. Soon his smooth skin would begin to sag. His hair would lose its shine. The Super Soldier Serum couldn’t keep them young. Not forever.

Tony pressed the inner corners of his eyes. He should get some rest too, but he didn’t want Stephen to wake up alone. Plus if he was down here, he’d be quicker to react if Stephen needed medical attention. Something rattled the door. Tony looked up and found the cloak hovering outside…with another gurney.

Tony couldn’t suppress his chuckle. He let the cloak in. The tips of its burgundy fabric were folded on top of each other like a human crossing its arms. Stephen had retrieved it before returning from Vormir, but the cloak was not impressed. It was mad at Stephen for abandoning it, and demonstrated its displeasure by refusing to settle on Stephen’s shoulders.

Tony removed the railing on one side of the gurney. He lined it up with the one Stephen occupied, creating a make-shift bed for two. Tony lay down and groaned as his joints cracked. He threw the fleece blanket they kept down in the lab over himself and Stephen. Jarvis dimmed the lights.

Steady beeps from the monitor told Tony that Stephen was alive and well. Tony’s lids were drooping close when something added extra weight to his covers. The cloak had settled on top of the blanket. It fanned over them both. Tony drew his hand from under the covers. He patted the cloak on the collar. “He cares about you,” Tony said.

A strange thought popped into his mind, one that Tony was certain did not belong to him.

*He cares about you too.*

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: [ivivao3.tumblr.com](http://ivivao3.tumblr.com)
Stephen messed up. That was the objective truth. Given the chance, he wouldn’t have changed any of his actions. They succeeded in one future, therefore that future was what his current timeline must become, but no amount of noble intentions could justify hurting the person he loved.

Tony was seated in front of a workbench, leaving the second gurney empty. He had his back to the room and didn’t notice Stephen’s shuffling. The Red Skull was a despicable man, but he made a valid point: the stone keepers were cursed with knowledge. Wanting to avoid the scorching questions, Stephen soaked up Tony’s presence without alerting him. There was nothing more to discuss. Stephen had told Tony what was allowed and would keep from Tony the things he must not know.

Their trip to Vormir hadn’t gone according to plan, but not all hope was lost. Stephen would gain another opportunity to steer his timeline back on track, one final fork in the road. Though for him to succeed, he must continue to keep Tony in the dark. A fresh pang of pain slowed Stephen’s racing mind. One way or another, it seemed that Tony was always being wronged. Howard, Stane, the Ten Rings, Vanko, Killian, the Avengers, Thanos, and now...Stephen himself. Stephen had sworn to protect Tony, but what would happen when he became the biggest source of Tony’s pain?

Stephen took in Tony’s sleep-mussed hair, workshop tank top, and oil-stained hands. In the lab, amidst his robotic companions, Tony was at ease with the world. Stephen committed the scene to memory. It was so peaceful, a perfect distillation of the life he fought to preserve. Stephen didn’t dare blink. He stared until his eyes watered. As hesitant as Stephen was to claim the title, he was Earth’s Sorcerer Supreme. If he couldn’t make the hard decisions, then there was nothing standing between humanity and doom.

Tony was tinkering with a chunk of nanoparticles. The engineer reached across the workbench and couldn’t find the tool he was searching for. He turned, his gaze locking with Stephen’s. “You’re awake,” Tony said. He padded over across the lab and scanned the statistics on the monitor. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” Stephen rasped.

“That doesn’t sound ‘good’.” Tony pursed his lips. Suddenly they were both mesmerised by the lab’s polished floors. “Hungry? Sit tight, I’ll make you an omelette.” Tony left as if there was something hot on his tail.

With no one in the vicinity, Stephen slumped against the gurney. The cushioning was stiff against his back. Stephen breathed a sigh of exhaustion. Tony hadn’t pressed for answers, which could
only mean he knew his efforts were futile. He wouldn’t get anything else out of Stephen. The aftermath of Vormir had formed a hairline crack in their relationship, but neither of them knew how to address it. The tension wasn’t enough to warrant a conversation, yet lingered in ways that made sharing a room awkward. It’d go away on its own, worse wounds had, but at a time like this, Stephen missed Tony’s companionship more than anything.

Blacking out for fifteen hours had helped his body recover, but he was going to need at least another fifteen to return to fighting condition. There was a lull in the timeline after returning from Vormir, so Stephen indulged in the luxury of laying still. He stared at the ceiling until Tony returned. The smell of freshly cooked eggs triggered a chain reaction. Stephen remembered that he hadn’t eaten anything since yesterday. His stomach grumbled at the aroma.

Tony smiled at the not so subtle noise. He helped Stephen sit then watched Stephen eat the omelette in silence. Tony’s culinary skills had improved drastically. The omelette tasted delicious, nothing like the health hazard he’d presented Stephen years back.

Tony took the empty plate. “I’ll see what the others are up to. Are you gonna be…”

Stephen recalled the last thing he’d said on the Milano. “I’ll be fine.”

Tony nodded. “Yell out if you need me.” The doors closed again.

Stephen removed himself from the gurney gingerly. If this was what he felt like with the Super Soldier Serum, he didn’t want to know what he’d feel like without it. Stephen returned to the penthouse. Tony had cleansed him of the Vormir grime, but he wanted another shower. His muscles softened as hot water glided down his back. He used his usual shampoo. It smelled of cedar and grapefruit. Stephen took the time to trim his goatee. It’d been peering at him through thick stubble, looking as sorry as he felt. He completed his routine by massaging lotion onto his face and applying a light dab of cologne to his wrists.

The return to familiarity helped Stephen feel human again. Preening had once been his go-to method of stress relief. Call him vain, but there was something reassuring about looking and feeling well-curated. One couldn’t stare down competitors with oily hair and sweat-stained shirts. During his surgeon days, Stephen had spent an obscene amount on his appearance. Those habits stuck, and the same things soothed him even after he’d moved on from that life.

Stephen changed into loungewear. He retrieved his Stark pad from the nightstand and was overcome with a sense of dilemma. He needed a private place to conduct research, but he didn’t want to return to the lab, where he might alarm Tony. Nor did he want to visit the sanctum; Wong was bound to expect answers. Stephen journeyed down to the hangar, which he suspected would be empty at this hour. He strode past the Milano with a sense of déjà vu. He had be so certain he’d seen the last of her on Vormir, yet here they were, brushing shoulders again.

Stephen rounded the Milano and ran head first into Peter Quill. The captain of the ship was seated on a crate, jamming to his headphones. Stephen saw what lay on the other end of the cord and cringed. Maybe some of Tony’s tech snobbery had rubbed off on him, but was that a Zune?

Stephen knew his precious hour of peace and quiet was over when Quill took off his headphones. “Hey, saw you got pretty banged up. How are you feeling?”

Stephen sighed inwardly. He supposed there were worse ways to spend his afternoon than talking with someone who cared about his wellbeing. Stephen joined Quill on the crate. “I’ll survive.” Quill nodded. They sat quietly for a while, unsure of what to say. Stephen gazed out the hangar’s opening. They weren’t far from the open sky. Below the landing pad, New York City carried on as
usual. “How are you finding Earth?”

“How don’t see much of it.” Quill shrugged. “You guys don’t trust us, but that’s fine. My plan was, we beat the crap out of Thanos, prove we are trustworthy, then see if I have any family left in Missouri.”


Quill lifted his brows. Zunes weren’t equipped to produce external audio, so he cranked up the volume of his headphones. A raspy, but steady stream of music flowed into the hangar. Quill pressed the next button.

“Caught in a Dream, Alice Cooper, 1971,” Stephen said.

“Oh, you’re good!” Quill skipped to another song.


A fresh beat began. It took Stephen longer this time. Not because he didn’t recognise it, but because he knew it too well.

-

Every time when I look in the mirror
All these lines on my face getting clearer
The past is gone
It went by, like dusk to dawn
Isn’t that the way
Everybody’s got the dues in life to pay

I know nobody knows
Where it comes and where it goes
I know it’s everybody’s sin
You got to lose to know how to win

Half my life
Is books, written pages
Live and learn from fools and
From sages
You know it’s true, oh
All these feelings come back to you

-“Dream On, Aerosmith, 1973,” Stephen muttered. Quill nodded. He let the remainder of the song play out. They sat on the crate, listening to the raspy tune and watching the world outside.
Sing with me, sing for the years
Sing for the laughter, sing for the tears
Sing with me, just for today
Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away

- 

Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away.

If that wasn’t all too true. Heroes had a glamorous life, but each of them was counting their days. Days until the next big villain, until the next big threat, until the next time they’d have kiss their loved ones goodbye, only this time, they wouldn’t return.

“What would you rather be doing?” Stephen asked as clouds drifted across a yellowing sky. “If you could choose. If infinite power didn’t exist.”

“I’d be traveling the galaxy with my girl.” Quill smirked. “We’d stir up all kinds of trouble, with a big group of idiots by our side.” He said without hesitation, like it was the only possible answer and nothing else in the world made him happier. He turned to Stephen. “You?”

The answer came to Stephen just as quickly. “I’d stay right here, in the tower, with Tony. We’d cook together every Thursday. On some weeks we’d have friends over, other weeks it’d be just us. There’d be no saving the day, no surprises.”

“A normal life,” Quill said.

“Yeah.” The prospect of living a peaceful life with Tony sent a sharp spike of pain down Stephen’s chest. He stilled himself before he dared to wonder further. That was the dream, wasn’t it? A normal life. Tony could be an inventor. Stephen could fix his hands. Together they could travel a world that didn’t need their protection. They could grow old in a bungalow near the sea.

Stephen and Quill sat, pretending to listen to the song when they were both consumed by their thoughts. Quill switched off his Zune when the song ended. “I heard about what happened. You should talk to him. Stark, I mean.” Stephen looked at Quill, who was fiddling with the cord of his headphones. “Sometimes you’ve got years to make things right. You’re confronted by a problem, you mull it over, doubt yourself, then make up your mind and go for it. But other times, all you’ve got is seconds. Once it slips past you, it’s gone forever.”

Quill spoke with such precision, it made his advice impossible to ignore. Could it be personal experience that prompted such words from the captain of the Milano? They’d focused on risk assessment when he and Tony viewed Quill’s file. They knew a scant amount about Quill’s life in Missouri. Stephen would peg Quill for a participant, be it in good or bad deeds. He didn’t seem like the witness type. Regardless of Stephen’s assumptions, he didn’t pry into Quill’s personal affairs. They had all done things they’d rather forget.

“With this coming war, who knows if any of us will live out our dreams,” Quill said. After a pause, he stood, pocketed his Zune, and dusted off his pants. “Anyway, better check on the rest of my crew. All I’m trying to say is, don’t leave it till it’s too late. You’ve got things to say? Say them now.”

Stephen considered Quill’s words. They exchanged nods and Quill was on his way. Stephen heard Quill’s footsteps fade. The elevator chimed. He was finally alone as he intended.

“Doc…?” Friday’s hesitant voice sounded from his Stark pad.
“Yeah?” Stephen replied. There was only one thing his AI companion could want.

“You should talk to boss.” Since enduring the Dark Dimension together, he and Friday had developed a strong sense of camaraderie. She was his best helper and took his side in arguments unconditionally. There was, however, an exception when it came to Tony. It was strange, since Stephen was sure Tony did not program this. Friday cared a great deal for her creator. She also knew how much Tony meant to him.

“I will,” Stephen promised. “But first, there’s something I must do.” His finger deftly swiped across the screen, retrieving an encrypted file from his private server. Stephen’s hand hovered above the file. After a moment’s hesitation, he deleted it. It was of no use to him now.

Stephen fished out another piece of electronics from his pocket. Peter, we need to talk. Vroom. Steve’s text shot off with the signature sound effect of his Stark phone.

Friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man, at your service! Peter replied freakishly fast. Was his phone glued to his palm? Stephen mentioned for Peter to keep quiet and meet him in the hangar. He closed his eyes as he waited for Peter, listening to the muted sounds of the New York streets.

Stephen Strange was not one to accept fate. He was one to wrestle with it. He’d won once when he sent Tony back in time. A tiny voice in his head told him that this time, he was too late; they’d missed their chance back on Vormir. To some extent, Stephen agreed with it. But even if they were destined to fail, he’d be damned if he doesn’t give fate one last sock in the jaw.

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Tony was glad to find the living space full when he entered with dirty dishes. Empty rooms were bad for his sanity, plus it was reassuring to see everyone get along. It erased the species barrier between them, reminded Tony that alien or no, they were in this mess together.

In his state of worry, Tony had instructed Quill to land at the tower last night. He preferred to separate Avenger business from his private life, but given that half of his team was in Wakanda, and another two headed for Nidavellir, Tony felt better if the rest of them stayed together.

His guests had taken the liberty to reconfigure the living space. The couches had been pushed back, and the fluffiest rug in the tower was laid in their place. The original coffee table took up the centre of the rug. Drax, Mantis, Gamora, Bruce, and Peter lounged around it. On top of the coffee table was a board game.

Oh no… Tony recognised the pieces. He looked at the ceiling in resignation. So much for getting along, they were playing Monopoly: The Avengers Edition.

It was Drax’s turn. He rolled three doubles in a roll and went straight to jail. “That’s outrageous. These flimsy walls could never contain me. I’m too strong,” Drax said as he studied the square barring his token. Tony was surprised to see he’d chosen Mjolnir.

“That’s the rule, Mr. Drax,” Peter said. His token was the Iron Man mask. He rolled a three, which
took him to the Avengers Compound. “Yes! That completes my upgrades.” Peter relinquished a stack of cash to the bank which maxed out the level of the property.

They didn’t seem to be out for blood…yet. Tony entered the open plan kitchen. He was pleasantly surprised to find that someone had cleaned his dishes. The group was feasting on a cherry pie, one of May’s home-baked treats. Only one person could’ve used the kitchen since Tony was last here.

Tony leaned on the spotless bench. He watched the group play. Chatter and laughter filled the space. It was so different to the presentable, yet lifeless state that the compound was frozen in. It brought back memory from the days when he used to consider the Avengers family. Tony soaked up the atmosphere like a dry sponge.

Nothing happened for another round, but Peter was clearly winning. Gamora went next. The poor woman landed on Stark Tower. Tony cringed. That was the most expensive property on the board. Rent on the fully upgraded Stark Tower costed a liver and a kidney. Combined with the fact that Peter had achieved Monopoly on Stark Industries properties, she went instantly bankrupt.

Drax was still in jail. Bruce and Mantis were teaming up to overthrow Peter. Gamora sighed. Relinquished of further game time, she picked up her mug for a refill at the kitchen. Tony recalled the space coffee they’d shared on the Milano. His eyes drifted to his espresso machine.

“Want a taste of real coffee?” Tony asked. “Promise you’ll never go back.”

Gamora lifted a single eyebrow. Though Tony wasn’t sure if she had eyebrows. They looked more like silver markings. “Sure.” Gamora placed her mug in Tony’s waiting hand.

Tony jabbed the espresso button, of which he was an expert. Beans ground inside the machine. Prior to this day, Tony had never noticed how long it took to brew a cup of his favourite beverage. The wait dragged into an awkward pause.

“Have you ever been to Xandar?” Tony asked mostly to ease the tension, though truth be told, he was curious. The planet fascinated Tony. Xandar housed a civilisation much more advanced than Earth. According to Thor, it was located in the Andromeda Galaxy, the Milky Way’s nearest neighbour. As a futurist, Xandar ticked all of Tony’s boxes. Given the chance, he would’ve loved to visit the capital of the Nova Empire.

“I have, occasionally on assignments. It was one of the better planets,” Gamora said.

“What did you get up to?” Tony watched two streams of brown liquid trickle into his and Gamora’s mug.

Gamora chuckled. She noticed Tony didn’t get the joke and said: “The last time we were there, we had a dance-off to save the galaxy.” Her explanation confused Tony further. Gamora shook her head. It was one of those jokes he had to be there to appreciate. “It’s a shame Thanos got to it.”

Tony snuck a glance at Peter, whose eyes were trained on the game too intently. He picked up the two mugs and gestured for Gamora to step outside. They strolled onto the decommissioned landing-strip. Tony returned Gamora’s mug and watched her take a sip.

“It’s not bad,” Gamora said. Stephen had Loki locked in his tea camp. They often broadcasted the superiority of leaf juice like a broken tape recorder. Tony smirked. Now he had extra-terrestrial support too.

They were halfway through their drink when Tony decided to bite the bullet. “You saw our defences on the way in. Does it stand a chance against Thanos?”
“If it could trap the Milano, it could trap Thanos’ army. It’d be too thin against Sanctuary, Thanos’ warship, but that abomination has the galaxy at its mercy,” Gamora said between sips of coffee.

“What are the chances of this Sanctuary showing up?”

Gamora considered the brown liquid inside her mug. “Denied the Space Stone, Thanos has to travel here physically. It makes no sense for him to leave it behind.”

They leaned against the railing, steaming beverages in hand. Tony looked back. Through the glass façade of the penthouse, he could make out the rest of the group. Drax, probably losing, had flipped the Monopoly board over. He was chasing Peter around the living space while Peter deftly webbed himself to walls and columns. Mantis cheered Drax on while Bruce finished his cherry pie. Their faces were lit with laughter.

“Do you think I made the right decision?” Tony asked no one in particular.

“No.” Gamora spun the mug around in her hand and watched Drax trip over the rug. Mantis laughed hysterically. “Before I met them, I never knew the meaning of family. I never thought I’d risk my life for another person, or that another person would risk their life for me.”

Gamora downed the rest of her drink in one swig. Tony suspected the bitter taste wasn’t what forced her to close her eyes. “I’d like to think I can do it, switch off all emotions like my training has taught me, but the truth is, I’m just a coward. I’ve gotten a taste of what family could be and I don’t want to let it go.”

She turned to face Tony. “I don’t think you made the right decision. I don’t think any of us did on Vormir. But if I couldn’t sacrifice Peter’s life for the stone, then I’m no more than a hypocrite who doesn’t deserve to judge you. Whatever happens next, there will be blood. That blood will be divided equally between the four of us.”

Chapter End Notes

Our heroes get some time to rest, but the storm beckons.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter Notes

Again, it is highly recommended to listen to the featured song. The music sets the mood. ;D

Featured song:
Grover Washington Jr - Just the two of us

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

Tony needed to bridge the divide between him and Stephen. He thought he had the patience to let things smooth themselves out, but truth was, he was craving the man’s company before the day ended. Tony missed the easy banter, the soft touches, and the knowing smiles. His conversation with Gamora hadn’t lifted any burdens. With no one to talk to, there was no way to diffuse his pent-up tension.

He didn’t know the Guardians enough for anything deeper than a chat. On the Avengers’ side, Peter was just a kid. It felt wrong to burden him with issues that Tony should’ve dealt with, which left Bruce as his last resort. Tony sat down with Bruce after his daily meditation. Bruce sipped on tea while Tony snacked on Cheetos. Tony had an unhealthy habit of bingeing on junk food when he was stressed. Thank god for semi-Super Soldier metabolism. If only Stephen was here. He would’ve whipped up a dish, and Tony would’ve cleared the plate while they discussed the next phase of their plan. If only Stephen was here.

Tony noticed Bruce’s tense shoulders. The past few days hadn’t been easy on him either. Avenger business rarely was. Violence stressed him, and with Thanos’ army threatening to doom Earth, Bruce spent his waking hours half green. Tony opened his mouth. As words flowed, a thought popped into his head.

I’m not that kind of doctor.

The memory formed a choking lump in Tony’s throat. Bruce asked if something was wrong. Tony plastered on a smile and asked how Bruce was holding up instead. Bruce took the conversation for a catch-up chat. He summarised the anomalies that had occurred while Tony was off-world, and reassured Tony that he and the Hulk were getting along. Tony left the conversation more stressed than ever.

It was half past ten; thirty minutes before he and Stephen’s agreed bedtime. Tony made way for the training facilities. If he couldn’t improve his mental state, at least he could blow off some physical steam. Tony waved away the target practice holograms. In the corner was a sand-filled bag, dangling from a thick chain. Tony approached it and struck a tentative punch. His fist sank into the smooth leather. The bag jolted backward, then swung toward him. Tony stopped it with his palm.

He took a deep breath and punched again, harder this time. The chain rattled. Tony struck, again
and again, letting the frustration out. Sometimes he wished he wasn’t the leader of the Avengers, or
the owner of Stark Industries, or Iron Man. Sometimes he even wished he wasn’t Tony Stark.
Other days, he’d wish he was himself, but more. He’d be stronger, smarter, deadlier; a shining
beacon of righteousness. It was what people wanted him to be. It was what Iron Man should be.

Tony listened to the way sand shifted inside the bag, felt the burn of leather against his knuckles.
He punched increasingly harder, until his bones ached, and his flesh bruised.

“You should wear tape,” a voice called from the entrance.

Tony came to a sudden halt. He turned and saw Stephen leaning against the door frame. Dressed in
comfortable loungewear, the blueish shadow beneath his eyes were all that remained of Vormir.
Tony didn’t know what irked him. It could’ve been Stephen’s aloof expression, his reserved
posture, or the fact he looked perfectly functional on his own. He even shaved. Meanwhile, Tony
was moping over the loss of his company.

Tony arched an eyebrow in challenge. He took a step back, positioned himself, and swung as hard
as he could. His enhanced muscles ripped the bag from the chain. It landed ten feet away. Sand
spilt from the neck of the bag like a yellow pool of blood. Stephen narrowed his eyes.

“What’s the matter? I thought you liked to see me sweat,” Tony said.

“I do.” Stephen could tell when Tony was trying to pick a fight. He avoided the bait, but only just.
“You should get some rest.” Tony glanced at his watch again. Eleven on the dot.

Tony tried to decipher the meaning behind Stephen’s words. Was it a jab? A fact? Or a genuine
reminder? He went with the first. “You’re gonna have to make me.”

Stephen’s face had been an immaculate mask. Tony’s attitude cracked it. “You’re being difficult.”

“I’m being difficult?” Tony took the replacement bag a bot bought out. He hooked it back onto the
chain. The bot retrieved the damaged bag and swept the spilt sand into a pile.

“Tony.”

Tony disregarded Stephen’s warning. He punched away at the new bag, ignoring his bruised
knuckles. The bot vacuumed up the sand and disappeared down the maintenance shaft. Thud thud.
Thud thud. The sound of Tony’s punches echoed in the room. Stephen pushed off the door frame,
kicked off his slippers, and marched in. Tony smirked. Stephen preferred passive aggression, but
never let it be said that he didn’t have a temper.

“I’m giving you ten minutes,” Stephen said.

“More than enough time to kick your ass.”

Tony lunged at Stephen. It had been a while since they sparred with each other. They were too
familiar with the way the other moved. Stephen saw the attack from a mile away. He sidestepped
Tony’s strike and threw a rapid series of punches, twice down low, and one up top. Tony blocked
them with ease, but he wasn’t prepared for the blow that struck his abdomen. He staggered
backward. Stephen hadn’t used his full strength. Tony could dent steel, and Stephen had been
injected with the same serum he had. The blow was merely an ill-tempered tap. A tap that given
the circumstances, chipped a corner off Tony’s pride.

Tony staggered to a halt. He slowly raised his head, cracked his neck, and met Stephen’s gaze.
Stephen shifted uncomfortably. “Tony, I’m—” Tony didn’t let Stephen finish. He began a fresh
sequence of attacks, this time utilising his martial arts skills.

The cloak wasn’t around; probably still mad at Stephen. That stubborn piece of outerwear had more personality than most people. Without his magical companion, Stephen could now be blindsided. Tony took that advantage and reverse engineered Stephen’s understanding of the way he fought. Tony followed his usual attack pattern, but mixed in moves that felt cumbersome or awkward. Those strikes always stuck.

Stephen was fighting purely on the defence. He blocked a knee to the stomach, an elbow to the face, a punch to the ribs, but more kept coming. Tony was relentless. He followed with deft footwork as Stephen backtracked across the room. Stephen was overwhelmed by his strikes. More moves connected. One in ten became one in five, then one in three, then one in one.

That was when Tony realised Stephen had stopped blocking. The man was hunched with an arm in front of his face and an arm across his midsection. He was letting Tony take out his anger on him. Tony’s punches came to a halt. His even breathes had given way to jagged puffs. A feeling of nausea crept up his spine. What was he doing? He didn’t want to hurt Stephen. Not in the slightest. He was taking his frustration out on the one he loved.

A toxic concoction had been bubbling inside Tony since their confrontation on the cliff. It overflowed as self-loathing dissolved into the mix. Stephen was the only person who understood, but Tony was hurting him. The net wouldn’t work. Tony had wasted years to perfect it. Stephen had excluded Tony from the planning process. They were supposed to be a team. He didn’t know what was going on. Would they ever stand a chance against Thanos? Tony once held the Soul Stone in his grasp, but he let it slip away and now an extra-terrestrial army was going to destroy them all.

“I got you.” The soft voice pulled Tony back to reality. He looked up to find Stephen’s concerned expression. Stephen placed a hand on Tony’s arm and squeezed. The touch was gentle enough to comfort, but firm enough to ground him. Tony closed his eyes. This time he saw not the lightless void, but a sky full of stars. Tony leaned into Stephen’s embrace. “I got you,” Stephen murmured.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said from the crook of Stephen’s neck. “I’m acting like an idiot. I don’t know what came over me.” The adrenalin ebbed away, leaving him to confront what he’d done with a sober mind.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry too.” Stephen tightened his hold. They stayed in each other’s embrace, tired and drained, but together. “I know these past days were frustrating. I’m sorry for not telling you the truth. I’m sorry for everything I’ve done. I truly am.”

Tony nodded. Stephen’s goatee tickled the corner of his eye. A chuckle escaped Tony. He’d missed every aspect of Stephen, even the ways that Stephen annoyed him. Tony gave Stephen a nip on the chin then kissed him. His lips dragged across Stephen’s, who deepened the kiss by catching Tony’s tongue. The pair parted breathlessly. “We could’ve had steamy hate sex,” Tony quipped.

Stephen threw his head back in laughter. “Get your mind out of the gutter.” Tony’s ass was rewarded a sharp slap, to which Tony responded with an over the top wink.

They’d make an odd sight to anyone that chanced upon them now, all sweaty and glued together in the centre of the training room. Tony couldn’t care less. His tower, his rules. He just made up with his fiancé and the others could deal with it.

The last time he and Stephen were intimate like this had been on the trip to Vormir. Tony never
wanted to see that cursed planet again. He likely wouldn’t. The team planned to relocate to Wakanda tomorrow. There was no use in spreading them thin. Tony felt uneasy with keeping the Infinity Stones in one basket, but he agreed because Wakanda was the best option they had. Compared to the formidable yet fragile might of the sanctum, Wakanda boasted an army outfitted with Vibranium, and an energy barrier that cocooned the city.

It occurred to Tony that tonight might be the last night they’d have to themselves. The pair shuffled a little. The sense of safety was throwing them off balance. Faint, raspy music began to play.

_I…the...drops fall...beau...of it all..._ Tony’s brows knotted together. He looked to Stephen, who appeared equally confused. A voice boomed from the speakers.

“Hey Parker, is this working?” A loud clang followed.

“Don’t hit it, you’ll break it!” More clanging noises, then the sound of plastic scraping together. “Why are you pressing that thing to the speakers? We have Bluetooth. Which song are you trying to play?”

Tony looked up at the surveillance camera. In this life, he had the tower to himself. He installed them since he didn’t have to worry about his teammates’ privacy. “Is that Peter and…Peter?”

“Please excuse us as we experience some technical difficulties,” Quill said.

“Don’t tell me the kid gave him access to our commlink.” Tony groaned.

Whatever it was they wanted to do, the Peters did it quickly. “Good evening ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. You are tuned in to the Galaxy’s Hottest Mixes,” Quill said as music entered the foreground. This time the song was louder, and the audio quality crisp to the ear. “I, Star Lord, legendary outlaw, will be your host for the evening. Rest assured, you are in capable hands, so kick back, relax, and let the music take you far, far away.”

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_I see the crystal raindrops fall_

_And the beauty of it all_

_Is when the sun comes shining through_

_To make those rainbows in my mind_

_When I think of you sometime_

_And I wanna spend some time with you_

_-

The music was lively, the lyrics perfect for the moment. Tony had to admit, Quill was growing on him. “Time to dance, old man.” He swung Stephen in a circle when the sorcerer wasn’t paying attention.

“Were they spying on us?” Stephen sounded offended. “Did they think I needed help?”

“A bit of spontaneity couldn’t hurt.” Tony pulled Stephen closer. Stephen held the grumpy charade for another heartbeat, but the music won out. He followed Tony’s lead. The pair glided across their makeshift dancefloor.
Just the two of us

We can make it if we try

Just the two of us

(Just the two of us)

Just the two of us

Building castles in the sky

Just the two of us

You and I

It had been so long since they last danced. Their footsteps began fast and full of energy. As the song played, it simmered into something slower, more intimate. Tony and Stephen moved in sync with the beat. Music was its own class of magic. True to Quill’s words, the song did take them far, far away. On the dancefloor, all that mattered were the beat and the person a hair’s breadth away. They no longer led the Avengers. There was no threat waiting around the corner. Infinite power didn’t exist. They swayed, hopped, and laughed.

When music played, everything was alright.

Stephen’s right hand was linked with Tony’s. He removed his left from Tony’s waist. With a swirl of his hand, the ceiling dissolved. Tony gasped as a starry sky formed above him. Memories brought him back onto the rock where Stephen got down on one knee.

“Show off.” Tony couldn’t help the quiver in his voice.

We look for love, no time for tears

Wasted water’s all that is

And it don’t make no flowers grow

Good things might come to those who wait

Not for those who wait too late

We gotta go for all we know

Just the two of us

We can make it if we try

Just the two of us
(Just the two of us)

Just the two of us

Building them castles in the sky

Just the two of us

You and I

-

They held onto each other long after the music faded. No further songs came from the commlink. They swayed to an imaginary beat, not wanting to part just yet. But eventually, that too must end.

Time to return to reality.

“Promise me you won’t do it again,” Tony said.

“I…”

“Promise me.” Tony looked into Stephen’s eyes. They were bright underneath the starlight. Stephen never made promises he couldn’t keep, but that was precisely why Tony pressed. Tony ran his fingers across Stephen’s temple, down his hairline, stopping on his lips. “Promise.” Tony always knew he was a manipulative bastard. He didn’t bother to hide the desperation in his voice.

“I’ll stay by your side. Until the very end.” Stephen’s promise ghosted past his fingertips. Tony breathed a sigh of relief. He gave Stephen one last squeeze then let go.

“We should get some sleep.” They’d dawdled long past Stephen’s allotted timeframe. Tony checked his watch. It was fitting for their fairy-tale detour to end at midnight.

“Yeah, it’s getting late.” Stephen rubbed the back of his neck. They made way for the door.

“I’m all ears.” Tony didn’t like where the conversation was going. Stephen asking for things formally? Never a good sign.

“I need the ring back for a few hours.”

Tony’s heart sank at the words. At first, he’d assumed Stephen was having second thoughts about their engagement. Then the rational side of him noticed that Stephen had specified a time for the ring’s return.

“What for?”

“Failsafe.”

“You can’t tell me more, can you?” Tony sighed as Stephen shook his head. He regarded the silver band that never left his person since the day he received it. Tony twisted the ring on his finger, then reluctantly took it off, leaving a paler band of skin in its place.

“You’ll know,” Stephen said as Tony dropped the ring in his waiting hand.

“In time.”
And there we have it folks, the end to our calm before the storm. The war begins next chapter. Good luck to our cast.

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Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Excelsior, Stan.

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Afternoon, April 4th, 2018 – Wakanda battle room

The Avengers were ready when the Net deployed.

The inhabitants of Stark Tower had spent the past day in Wakanda, perfecting their battle strategy and integrating each Avenger into Wakanda’s defences. Despite that Wakanda had no regard for balustrades, their equipment was top notch. Tony had shivered at the sight of the Vibranium mine. He imagined the things he could have done then decided it was best not to dwell over the what-ifs.

They were introduced to Shuri, T’Challa’s little sister and leader of the Wakandan Design Group. She gave the Net’s wiring one final pass whereas Tony smoothed out some kinks in Wakanda’s energy barrier. Stephen, Bruce, and Peter contributed invaluable insight too. They crosschecked each other’s work. Mistakes could lead to catastrophic consequences, and at this point, none of them could afford a mishap. Together with Shuri, they formed the new and improved science division. They were some of the brightest minds of the twenty-first century. Tony could only hope their combined intellect was enough to curb the coming invasion.

The science division and the Guardians occupied the battle room. A hologram of Earth hovered in the centre of the space. Encasing the entire globe in nanoparticles cost an astronomical amount of resources. It was influence neither Tony nor the Avengers had. Tony made do with positioning satellites in strategic points. The Net was designed to deploy in sections that protected the target region. A Q-ship parked on top of Wakanda, just shy of the Net’s reach.

Shuri magnified the area. The Princess of Wakanda had her hair braided into two small buns, one on each side of her head. She wore a translucent orange coat coupled with dark pants. “They are staying put.”

“Not for long,” Tony considered the ship’s location. Black under armour stretched with his movement. Mark Sixty gleamed under the hologram’s pale light. “No sign of Sanctuary.”

“That’s a scout ship. The Outriders await their master,” Gamora said.

“Ground team ready,” Steve said in the commlink. He was stationed at the front lines with Rhodey, Bucky, Sam, Natasha, Clint, and T’Challa. Wakanda was enclosed by lush mountain ranges. The army was waiting for the intruders at the meadow, the outskirt’s only section of flat terrain.

“Something’s coming.” Shuri manipulated the hologram to the boundary of their sensors. From the edge of the screen, a foreboding shadow crept into view. It blocked out the northern sector of the
hologram like a system malfunction. Shuri adjusted the settings. She rendered a snapshot of the shadow and brightened the screen. Tony’s heart sank. That wasn’t a shadow. It was the head of a ship. The pointed hull extended into two colossal wings which folded down to form a flattened diamond shape. The ship dwarfed their satellites. Compared to Sanctuary, the Q-ship was a single pixel on the screen.

“Guys, you seeing this?” Rhodey asked in the group com.

“Well…shit,” Bucky said. “Tell me that’s not gonna dock.” The ground team was equipped with external HUDs which covered their left eye. The display was faint so it wouldn’t hinder depth perception, but despite its subtlety, the tiny square was enough to keep each squad member updated with visuals.

“It won’t need to.” Gamora clenched her fists as she studied the colossal warship. True to her words, the wings of Sanctuary opened. A wave of Q-ships appeared in the hologram. It merged with the scout ship, then split into three fleets. The biggest of the three made a beeline for Wakanda. Tony kept his eyes trained on the other two. After a moment of observation, their destinations became clear.

New York and Shanghai.

“They are trying to separate us,” Tony said. The Infinity Stones were drawn to each other. Thanos knew they were hunkered down in Wakanda. The Q-ships were meant to lure them out of hiding. Tony bit into his bottom lip. The cities wouldn’t stand a chance against alien battleships, but strategically, what happened to the rest of the world didn’t concern them. Their first and foremost priority was to protect the Infinity Stones. Thanos was testing them, waiting to see if they’d stretch themselves thin, or stay in the barrier and watch the world burn.

The Net split too. “It’s too much for Jarvis to handle. They are coming from all sides.” As Ultron ended in disaster, in this life, Tony never gave AI creation another go. Tony inputted manual instructions to assist Jarvis. Shuri caught on quickly. Her fingers tapped the holographic keys, creating a flurry of light.

“Doc, I’m going in to help,” Friday said. Stephen’s HUD dimmed as she focused on aiding her older brother.

“I’ll be back soon, Peter.” Karen joined the fight too. With the addition of two more world-class AIs, Tony and Shuri could afford to concentrate on the fight. In the hologram, tens of thousands of red and gold dots erupted from the satellites. They interlocked and formed a woven mesh of plasma. Jarvis’ reach receded until he oversaw the Net above Wakanda. Friday and Karen took over New York and Shanghai. The Q-ships crashed into the Net at full speed. The momentum carried them forward, stretching the Net thin.

“Come on,” Tony murmured. The Net slowly returned to its original shape, pushing the Q-ships back. The Q-ships thrusted forward, trying to break the bond between the orbs and punch through, but the Net held.

“Hell yeah!” Quill cheered. He knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of the welcome party. “Take that, you bastards.”

“Jarvis, Protocol: Get Off My Lawn,” Tony smirked. Peter and Shuri gave him a dirty look. Tony shrugged. They might be under attack, but nothing was going to stop him from naming protocols appropriately.
“With pleasure, Sir.” The Net divided into uniform squares. The red and gold orbs wrapped around the Q-ships like foil around candy. Glowing numbers on the control panel indicated that the orbs had reached peak energy output. Each orb excreted its own gravitational pull. Panels on the Q-ships began to loosen, then break apart. The plasma had singed a criss-cross pattern across their dark crimson shells. Tony clenched his jaw and watched the Net function as he’d intended.

It was working, but the flutter in Tony’s stomach wouldn’t go away. This was too easy.

“I know what it’s like to lose.” A low voice boomed above Earth. It occurred to Tony that up until this point, Sanctuary had been still as a statue. “To feel so desperately that you’re right, yet to fail nonetheless. It’s frightening. Turns the legs to jelly. I ask you, to what end? Dread it. Run from it. Destiney arrives all the same. And now, it’s here. Or should I say, I am.”

The voice laughed. A brilliant wave of purple energy pulsated from Sanctuary. The Net shattered on impact. Curses echoed in the battle room.

“Prepare for contact,” T’Challa said from the frontlines.

“Bruce, Peter, come with me to New York. Barnes, Romanov, Barton, Rhodey, Wilson, to Shanghai.” The helmet of Mark Sixty snapped close. Tony looked to Stephen. “Stay here.”

Stephen regarded Tony as if he’d sprout another head. “I’m coming with you.”

“Then the Time Stone stays.”

“The Eye stays with me.”

“Exactly, bye.”

Stephen gave a miffed tsk but didn’t argue further. “I’m dropping off the Mind Stone,” Steve said. He was going to Shanghai. Tony rolled his eyes. Trust Steve to sprint toward a fight. He wouldn’t see much action if he remained inside the barrier. There was no telling what arsenal the Outriders had. And these ‘Children of Thanos’… Gamora had briefed the Avengers of their freakish abilities, but Tony had confidence the energy barrier would hold.

Then again, he’d had confidence in the Net too.

Stephen drew a portal which transported half the Avengers to Shanghai. Steve dropped off the sceptre and left too. Tony was halfway through the portal to New York when Stephen spoke. “I’ll keep an eye on you.”

“You won’t need to.” Tony winked at his partner in crime. The portal closed behind him, not quickly enough to hide Stephen’s smile. Tony lingered in the atmosphere for another heartbeat. When he turned, all traces of warmth were wiped from his face.

The streets were a mess. Debris and dust clouded the atmosphere. The Q-ship hovered above Manhattan. It was spinning at such a high velocity that the resulting winds ripped apart shop signs and sent them soaring down the street. Wong appeared from a portal. He’d been stationed at the sanctum a block away. Hopefully mystic threats chose another day to doom Earth. Tony looked to his left, Peter’s Iron Spider suit gleamed under the sunlight. He looked to his right, Bruce stood tall with a tint of green to his veins.

It was time to get this show on the road.

Two figures descended from the Q-ship in a blue beam of light. The leader of the two had grey,
wrinkled skin and a balding head. Black robes embellished with leather and gold clung to his shrivelled frame. His bead-like eyes surveyed the Avengers with contempt. The taller creature was a cross between a lizard and a troll. He wore thick battle armour and held a blood-stained axe.

Cull Obsidian and Ebony Maw. With names like those, it was impossible not to join a doomsday cult.

“Who let Voldemort out of the basement?” Tony quipped as the duo neared. The mask wasn’t enough to muffle Peter’s snicker.

“Hear me and rejoice,” Ebony Maw said. “You are about to die at the hands of the Children of Thanos. Be thankful, that your meaningless lives will now contribute to—”

“I’m sorry, Earth is closed today,” Tony interrupted. He has got a million things to do and listening to a space fanatic ramble about the benefits of genocide wasn’t one of them. “You better pack it up and get outta here.”

Ebony Maw narrowed his eyes. He surveyed the assortment of heroes. “Where is the stone keeper?”

“He’s booked out till July. Now get lost, Squidward.” Tony took a menacing step forward. No one was getting to Stephen. Not on his watch.

“You exhaust me,” Ebony Maw drawled. He turned to Cull Obsidian. “Our efforts here are futile. Kill him.”

The reptilian creature grunted. He swung the war axe in a wide arc, clearing an abandoned taxi from his path. He took a few slow steps, as if adjusting to Earth’s gravity, then charged toward Tony. Nanoparticles peeled from Tony’s back, augmenting into repulsor cannons, but before Tony could fire, a man darted into the street.

Bruce ran forward in a straight line. With each step, the green veins on his skin widened. His muscles grew, and clothes tore from his frame. The shirt he’d been wearing fluttered to the ground in frayed strips. He met the monster head on. Cull Obsidian lifted his axe, but before he could bring down the pointed tip, a ginormous green fist connected with his jaw. Cull Obsidian soared backward. Invisible forces swatted him aside when he was about to connect with Ebony Maw. Cull Obsidian crashed into the sidewalk, flattening a car beneath his towering frame. The Hulk stood in the middle of the street and let out a deafening roar.

“Hulk, SMASH!”

Tony smirked. “Yeah, buddy. There’s never been a better time.” The Hulk leapt for his fallen foe, scoring another punch while Cull Obsidian was down. They crashed through a building and landed in the adjacent street. Tony fired up his thrusters and made way for Ebony Maw. He dodged the spikes that darted his way. They were shaved from collapsed bricks. The shrivelled creature’s powers were the most abstract of his siblings. According to Gamora, it was best explained as molecular telekinesis. He could move and manipulate objects to his will, a tricky power. Tony eyed Ebony Maw’s thin armour and humanoid appearance. Be it ego or contempt, Ebony Maw had the least protection of his siblings but also the most fragile form. If either Tony or Peter could score a direct hit, it’d keep him down.

“Kid, six and twelve,” Tony said.

“Got it!” Peter stuck to the façade of a building and disappeared inside a shattered window. Ebony
Maw paid Peter no mind. He ripped the reinforcement from beneath the asphalt and tried to strangle Tony with them. Steel rods twirled in the air like hissing snakes. Tony kept Ebony Maw occupied with repulsor fire as he manoeuvred around the projectiles. Peter peeked out from an apartment window down the street. On Mark Sixty’s HUD, a wireframe of the Iron Spider showed Tony where he was stationed.

“Go!” Tony threw a grenade at Ebony Maw’s feet. The alien erected a slab of concrete, but a portal appeared on the barrier. Wong placed his ringed hand before him and spun in circles with his right. The shockwave travelled through the portal and blasted Ebony Maw backward. Peter left his hideout. He webbed the boot of a car and swung the vehicle over his shoulder like a plastic toy. The car travelled in a smooth arc and landed on top of Ebony Maw. The force would’ve crushed a regular human to pulp.

“Yeah!” Tony cheered. He landed before the squashed car. There was no movement coming from under the wreckage. Peter touched down behind him. He stepped forth to investigate. Tony placed a hand on Peter’s shoulder. “I’ll go,” Tony said. Wong approached the wreckage too, his ringed hand still raised. Tony flipped the car over, and a steel rod struck him on the chest. It sent him soaring backward.

A fire hydrant erupted. The jet of water flushed Wong to the other side of the street. Peter was pressed to the asphalt by an invisible force. The road cracked in half and swallowed him whole. Ebony Maw rose from the wreckage. Half of his body was burned by the explosion. Black blood flowed from a dent on his skull. His neck was crooked; broken, no doubt. How was he still alive?

A sharp pain blossomed from Tony’s sternum. He looked down and saw the fractured arc reactor. The pointed steel had nearly skewered him. He flew to Peter’s aid but sprung headfirst into a trap. A dozen steel rods coiled around him and tightened. Tony struggled against his restraint.

Ebony Maw’s mouth stretched into a wicked grin. A steel rod snaked before Tony and aimed for the fractured arc reactor. It drilled forward, but instead of connecting with the damaged reactor, the rod crossed an amber threshold and dived into the waiting void. Tony gasped at the miniature portal inches from his heart. Another portal appeared ten feet away. The man that appeared sported a dashing goatee and a burgundy cloak. He conjured a whip of Eldritch Magic. The tip of the whip struck Ebony Maw in the chest, flinging him into a café.

“Don’t’ touch him,” Stephen snarled through his teeth. “Told you I should’ve come,” he said to Tony without taking his eyes off the enemy.

Ebony Maw emerged from the tattered shop front. His expression was feral, the gleam in his eyes deeply unsettling. “Stone keeper.” His eyes shifted from Stephen to Tony.

“I could’ve handled—” Tony’s words were knocked from his windpipe. His confines whisked him down the street. Stephen shrunk into a dot in the distance. “Help Peter!” Tony shouted at Stephen as he flew toward the blue beam of light.

Chapter End Notes

Let the chaos begin! >:D

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Quill watched with clammy hands as Stark was whisked aboard the Q-ship. Strange followed. The spider kid dug himself out of the asphalt. “I’m going after them,” Parker yelled in the commlink. He swung after his kidnapped mentor. The tip of his web struck the tail of the Q-ship. The ship took off. Parker swayed in the wind like a real spider hanging on by a long, thin thread. He narrowly avoided the tip of a tower and climbed up as the Q-ship left Earth.

They lost visuals. Quill ran a hand down his face. It was the first hour of the invasion and they were already three men down. He skimmed past the feed of the other Avengers. They were in Shanghai, and the second Q-ship had landed. “Peter,” Gamora called. Quill went to her at once. “There he is.” She gestured to the dark purple spaceship that had left Sanctuary.

“You sure that’s him?” Quill asked.

“I’m certain. I’d never mistake that ship.” She was halfway out the battle room when her reply drifted into Quill’s ear. Quill caught up with a string of wide strides.

They stepped into the lift. Drax and Mantis were waiting on the Milano. Drax had been feverishly polishing his blade for the past day. His thirst for vengeance tormented him as Thanos neared. On this day, the person who’d murdered his wife and daughter would finally be in his reach. Mantis had volunteered to stay and look after him. Quill knew how Drax felt. If he had to find out the truth behind his mother’s death then wait years to throttle Ego, he’d be seething with fury too.

“It’s all been leading to this,” Gamora said. The doors slid open and revealed the Milano’s glowing thrusters. She tightened her fingers around the switchblade with the red gemstone.

“Let’s keep our eyes peeled and stick to the plan.” Quill took in Gamora’s unreadable expression. In the likely event that Thanos would appear, it made sense for the Guardians to go after him. Gamora had spent decades by the Mad Titan’s side. Many of the Guardians shared a deep personal grudge against him. Though call it intuition or something else equally intangible, Quill couldn’t help but wonder if their mission was a mistake.
Stephen had a split-second decision to make. His body reacted before his mind could trip over itself. He flew full-speed upward. Tony and Ebony Maw had disappeared in the beam. There was no visible means of entry into the ship. Luckily, Stephen had other plans. He maintained his trajectory as the ship started to put distance between them. He called upon the mystic energies. Worldly chaos threatened to scatter his focus, but he was an experienced Master of the Mystic Arts. Stephen traced the outline of the Q-ship with his senses. He did not know what lay inside the alien space craft, but he knew he needed to get in. Stephen drew a single circle in the air. It manifested into a sparkling portal. He crossed the threshold and halted before he could crash into the opposite wall, then tucked and rolled to diffuse the momentum.

Only then did the impact of what he’d done sink in. Stephen’s eyes snapped to his HUD. Friday was in Shanghai, overseeing the Net, but the statistics still flowed. Peter’s vitals appeared stable. Stephen breathed a sigh of relief. It’d be a shame if the reward of rescuing Tony wasn’t a kiss, but a dropkick to the head.

“I’m going—KKTTCHH…” Static muffled Peter’s voice. Stephen lost the commlink. Going? Where was he going? Back to Wakanda? Wong had taken a hit, but it’d take more than a hit to topple the stocky librarian. With Stephen gone Wong would have to replace him for portal duty.

Stephen dusted himself off and surveyed his surroundings. The interior of the ship was dim, perhaps to conserve energy. Stephen noted the possibilities. Sanctuary was a hair’s breadth away. He must find Tony before the ship returned to alien territory. Stephen ventured forward. He followed the curving external walls and navigated the corridors with cautious footsteps. The cloak had stiffened on his shoulders. It, too, was alert for trouble. Something landed behind them with a light tap. Stephen snapped around. He came face to face with a pair of large, glowing eyes.

“Hey!” Peter beamed. His helmet dissolved, revealing a flushed face and mussed brown locks. “I know what you are gonna say—”

“You should not be here.” Stephen’s heart sank. Peter wasn’t ready for an extra-terrestrial mission. Tony had been hesitant to let him fight aliens in the first place.

“I was gonna keep my cool, but then Tony was kidnapped, and you guys just took off—”

“You need to leave.”

“I mean I could’ve asked for permission, but I was dangling in the air with the ship leaving the atmosphere. Karen was busy. Letting go didn’t seem like a good idea—” Peter rattled on. He waved his left arm like how he’d been flapping in the wind.

“You need to leave, now,” Stephen emphasised. There were no windows on the Q-ship. Judging by the speed they had been going, they must be in space by now. “I’m going to open a portal back to Earth.”

“And this suit is ridiculously intuitive, by the way. So if anything, it’s kinda your fault for going radio silent.” Stephen’s head snapped up at those words. The cloak flinched back as if it’d been personally affronted. It balled its front corners into little fists and leaned forward menacingly. “I take that back.” Peter grabbed the air between them and withdrew his statement.

“Listen, Peter.” Stephen took a deep breath. “This isn’t training. This isn’t crooks on the street with pistols. This is a one-way trip. Tony is in danger. I must protect him. I can’t keep an eye on you.”

“Sounds like you need all the help you can get.”
Stephen pulled his hair back none too gently. The painful tug released little of the pressure that was building inside his skull. “Clearly you didn’t think this through.”

“I did think this through.” Peter puffed up his chest.

“While you were being crushed by the road? You could not have possibly thought this through.”

“You can’t be a friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man if all the people you care about are gone.”

A heavy silence draped over them. Stephen pursed his lip and looked at anything but the young Avenger. He searched his brain for words to say, clever words strung in a logical sequence, but Peter had him trapped. His reasoning sounded like excuses as he rehearsed in his head. Stephen eventually sighed. “Remember what I told you in the hangar?”

“Yeah.” Peter nodded.

“That hasn’t changed.” Stephen took a step toward Peter and looked him dead in the eyes. “If it came down to you, or me, or Tony… I will not hesitate to let either one of us die. I can’t, because too much is at stake.”

“So we are sticking to the plan.” Peter swallowed loudly. “I can do that.”

Stephen smirked. Perhaps it’d taken him longer to warm up to the kid, but Peter truly had a heart of gold. He gave Peter’s shoulder a good squeeze and took the lead. The duo searched the bottom half of the Q-ship to no avail. These seemed like the storage compartments. For a ship so large, the corridors were strangely devoid of staff. They were running out of time. Any moment now, the Q-ship would dock at Sanctuary, and they’d lose all hopes of escape. They needed to find the control centre.

“Shhhh…” Peter halted. He lowered himself until his ear was pressed to the floor. “That way.” Peter sprung forward. Stephen hadn’t heard anything with his enhanced hearing, but Peter’s Spidey senses were more perceptive. Peter darted around crates and threaded through a maze of corridors until they came into a clearing. Their corridor had terminated on a platform which gave them a good view of the multitiered chamber. It was nested deep inside the ship. The curving walls bulged with pipework transporting fuel and other fluids. In the distance was a screen with flowing stars. This had to be the control centre.

Stephen’s limbs went stiff as he searched the other side of the clearing. Tony’s red and gold form hovered in the air. His restraints had been removed, but he remained ramrod straight. His helmet was missing. The nanoparticles peeled from his body, forming strange silver tendrils that drifted in the air. Hundreds of long crystal shards surrounded him. The needle-sharp points prodded against his exposed under-suit. Stephen hoped the force that suspended him was reliable.

Tony let out a pained groan. He slipped back to consciousness. A figure hovered into view. Ebony Maw wore an intricate metal brace which straightened his neck, but the dent in his skull remained. He waved aside the shards around Tony’s face, then to Stephen’s fury, reached out and snatched Tony’s jaw.

“In all the time I’ve served Thanos, I have never failed him,” Ebony Maw said as he tightened his hold.

“Well, first time for everything,” Tony grunted. He was forced to crane his head upward.

“If I were to return to Sanctuary, with neither the Time nor Mind Stone, there would be judgement.”
Tony tried to shake his head free. He snuck a glance at the corridors behind Ebony Maw. “Look, you are barking up the wrong tree. I don’t have any of the stones, and the ones who do won’t give them to you.”

Ebony Maw released his hold. “It’s true, you don’t. But the same cannot be said for someone aboard this ship. If he was willing to leave the barrier to block a strike to your heart…” With a wave of his hand, the shards that’d given way returned. Ebony Maw took a step back. The tip of the reflective needles found the exposed segments of Tony’s armour. “I wonder what he’d do if he heard you scream.”

The shard pierced Tony’s skin. Tony tried to suppress the pain, but the shards drilled deeper and deeper. He let out an agonised cry. Stephen took in Ebony Maw’s perverse grin. Thoughts of violence crossed his mind. For the first time in his life, the pacifist in Stephen agreed that something must die.

Stephen forced himself to concentrate. It was impossible to think over Tony’s screams. Stephen bit the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood. The sting returned some sense to him. He could strike, but he only had one shot. If Ebony Maw survived their surprise attack, he’d turn around and use Tony as hostage.

“Peter, what’s your take?” Stephen turned to the young Avenger beside him.

“Have you ever seen that really old movie: Aliens?” Peter asked. Realisation dawned on Stephen. That wasn’t a bad plan, and he knew just how to improve it.

“Painful, aren’t they? They were originally designed for microsurgery,” Ebony Maw drawled.

“Leave him alone, asshole!” Peter sprung from the platform. He landed behind Ebony Maw and shot multiple web grenades at the monster’s feet.

“Kid? What the—” Tony gasped at the sight of Peter. The reaction pulled on the shard embedded in his cheek. Tony winced, which made it worse. As he tried to ignore his predicament and keep track of Peter, a large portal appeared beneath him. A second one opened above him, then one to each of his four sides. The overlapping circles created an otherworldly box which severed Ebony Maw’s telekinesis. The nanoparticles that’d been torn apart returned to repair Mark Sixty. Gravity affected Tony once more, and he fell into the portal beneath. Tony landed near the glowing screen.

Assured that Tony was safe, Stephen joined the fight. Peter was keeping Ebony Maw occupied, but he was fighting a losing battle. Ebony Maw channelled his powers as if it were an integral sense like seeing or hearing. A piece of metal scraped past Peter’s helmet as he pulled himself from the projectile’s path. Stephen didn’t have another moment to lose. He opened a portal behind the creature whose sole focus was on Peter. A whip of Eldritch Magic soared toward him. The tip of the whip stopped an inch short of Ebony Maw’s face.

“Did you think I would fall for the same trick twice?” Ebony Maw asked Stephen. “You save nothing. Your powers are inconsequential—” A beam of energy blasted him through the portal. The amber ring of sparks snapped shut. Stephen turned to the source of the tell-tale hum. Tony was crouched on the ground with his right hand raised. The repulsor glowed blue in the darkness.

“Spare me the monologue,” Tony said.

“Are you alright?” Stephen rushed to Tony’s side. “Do you need medical attention?” He scanned Tony from head to toe, glaring at the suit as if staring harder would grant him X-ray vision.
“I’m fine.” Tony took the offered hand. “You heard him, those needles were meant for microsurgery.”

Stephen pulled Tony to his feet. His shaking fingers inspected Tony’s cheek. The spot that’d been punctured had healed under the effects of the serum. A dry drop of blood was beginning to flake. “Is that supposed to reassure me?”

“I told you to stay inside the barrier, then I told you to save Peter, not bring him here.” Tony wiped the blood from his face. He crossed his arms to put some distance between them.

“That would have ended in disaster.”

“I had it under control.”

“You were a pin cushion, you insufferable man.”

The shards could have damaged Tony on a molecular level. They needed to run some tests as soon as possible. Stephen glared at Tony as he keyed a reminder into his watch. He prided himself on his levelled head, but Tony had a knack for driving him up the wall. Worry from seeing Tony harmed combined with the anger he felt at Tony disregarding his own safety. Stephen wasn’t sure what he should do, so he grabbed Tony by his collar to shut him up. Their mouths crashed together.

Tony went stiff. When he recovered, all hell broke loose. Tony attacked Stephen’s lips with the ferocity of a backfired spell. They fought for dominance. Stephen slid his tongue into Tony’s mouth. The man yanked him back by his hair and bit his neck hard. Stephen winced. His eyes snapped open to see Peter dangle upside down from the ceiling. The kid looked like he wished he had a bucket of popcorn. A hot blush crept up Stephen’s face. He cleared his throat. It was then that Tony remembered they had an audience.

“Oh—don’t mind me. There’s nothing to worry about.” Peter said as he slid down the web. “In fact, I’m not even here. Hey Tony, is there a camouflage mode on this suit?”

“Yeah, stealth tech, but don’t—”

Peter touched down on the floor. He played with the controls of his suit. The surface of the Iron Spider rippled, changing to a wide spectrum of colours. Before Tony could stop him, Peter disappeared. “I’m invisible!” Soft taps indicated that Peter had left the vicinity. Both Tony and Stephen let out an exasperated sigh.

“Still want to have a kid?” Stephen rubbed his temples. He and Tony approached the glowing screen.

Tony grimaced. He gave Stephen one more peck on the lips. “All things considered, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Naturally.” Stephen’s cheek earned him a slap on the ass. He brought up the flight path. Without a pilot, the Q-ship was self-correcting its course. They were minutes away from docking. “We need to move.” Stephen reached out to close the screen, but a gauntlet caught his hand mid-air. “What’s wrong?” Stephen looked to Tony, who appeared deep in thought.

“I’m thinking I’m not so sure we should,” Tony murmured.

“What are you saying?”
“I’m not so sure if it’s a better plan to fight him on our turf or his. You saw what they did, what they can do. At least on his turf, he’s not expecting it.” Tony gestured to the warship that lay at the end of the path.

Stephen followed Tony’s reasoning. He could see where Tony was coming from, but it was too risky. There were too many variables. Their team was scattered. With Thor and Loki on Nidavellir and another half back on Earth, they needed to resolve the pressing issues first then regroup. “I think we should go. Our defences are stretched thin. We are no match for Thanos like this.” Tony chewed on his bottom lip. Stephen, too, had a nagging urge to end the invasion once and for all, but now wasn’t the time.

“Okay.” Tony gave Sanctuary one last glance. The ship was a lightless void in a field of stars. It beckoned them to meet their demise. The perpetual chill that seemed to shroud Stephen worsened. Tony switched off the screen. “You’re right. We’re not ready. Let’s turn this thing around.”

Chapter End Notes

The Supreme Family kicks ass together.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter Notes

Let's have some fun with Team Nidavellier. ;D

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki sat with a mug of steaming tea. He placed the boiling beverage on the table in front of him. It was too hot to drink, but instead of cooling it with Jotun frost, Loki leaned back and cracked his neck. A subdued groan escaped his lips. The bruise had faded at last, but the sensation of being choked within an inch of his life would follow him for decades to come. He’d performed seven jumps with the Tesseract so far. Thankfully, the escape pod was small, but crossing realms was no mortal feat. Operating the Tesseract had siphoned every sliver of magic from his damaged nerves. He was a stalk of wilted grass, brittle in the coming storm.

Loki gazed out the escape pod as he waited for his beverage to cool. There had been a time when he was mesmerised by the stars. He and Frigga would lay in the fields outside the palace, and his adoptive mother would teach him the lore behind each constellation. Loki had been a child then. He enjoyed those sessions immensely. They were always filled with wonders and he got to spend time with his favourite parent. He adored the fondness in Frigga’s eyes. She loved him, and there was not a thing she would change about him. To her, he was perfect with his bony limbs and head full of tricks.

That had been a lifetime ago, him with his mother, laying on a field outside the palace. The stars took on a different meaning when he fell from the Bifrost. The fall had been endless. Loki had reached out and tried to touch the twinkling stars. His limbs must’ve frozen in the vacuum of space, because he remembered wondering how something so beautiful could be so cold. He had been brought before Thanos, and the sparse, dim flecks around Sanctuary replaced the fields of colour from his childhood. Their most recent encounter hadn’t boded well either. Loki recalled the spiralling madness as his magic guided him through the galaxy. He’d grasped the Tesseract so tightly his fingers threatened to snap. Loki shifted his focus from beyond the window to the vapour that was creeping up the glass.

“I am Groot,” the Grootling said from the front of the escape pod. He needed facilities the pod lacked.

“Tinkle in the cup. We’re not looking. What’s there to see? What’s a twig? Everybody’s seen a twig before.” Rocket replied.

“I am Groot!”

“Tree, pour what’s in the cup out into space and go in the cup again.” That was his idiot brother.

“You speak Groot?” Rocket asked.

“Yes. They taught it in Asgard. It was an elective.”
While the pod had its advantages, its compact size worked against him too. Loki sighed and wrapped his hands around his tea. The heat returned some movement to his stiff joints. Loki stared at the leaves steeping in the water. He favoured simple green. Stephen’s recommended floral concoction always put him to sleep.

“I am Groot.”

“You’ll know when we’re close. Nidavellir’s forge harnesses the blazing power of a neutron star. It’s the birthplace of my hammer…” A short silence followed, then a clang shook the pod. Thor had slumped down on a bench. “It’s truly awesome.”

The pilot seat whirled. “Okay, time to be the captain,” Rocket mumbled. He wiggled off his seat and padded across the pod. “So dead parents huh? Yeah that could be annoying.” Loki concentrated on the leaves, pretending that he existed in a chasm of solitude.

“Well, they’ve been gone before. But no, this time I think it actually might be true.”

“And you said all your friends…”

“They fought till the end. Died honourable, warrior’s deaths.” Loki scoffed at Thor’s words. There was no honour in death. Death was the finale. It offered the means to an end and nothing more.

“Still got a home though?”

“Shattered by the Power Stone.”

Another moment of silence passed. It seemed even the raccoon had given up on enlivening his brother. It was wasted effort. Facts didn’t change to suit one’s sentiments. Loki’s gaze shifted to the side. Rocket’s little paws fiddled with the edge of his armour. “You sure you’re up to this particular murder mission?”

“Absolutely!” Thor’s voice cracked. “Rage and vengeance, anger, loss, regret…they are all tremendous motivators. They really clear the mind. So I’m—I’m good to go.”

“Yeah, but I mean, this is Thanos we’re talkin’ about. He’s the toughest there is.”

“Well, he’s never fought me.”

“Yeah, he has.”

“He’s never fought me twice. And I’m getting a new hammer, don’t forget.”

“It better be some hammer.”

Another pause.

“You know,” Thor’s booming voice was inescapable in the confinement of the pod, “I’m fifteen hundred years old. I’ve killed twice as many enemies as that, and every one of them would’ve rather killed me, but none succeeded. I’m only alive because fate wants me alive. Thanos is the just latest in a long line of bastards and he’ll be the latest to feel my vengeance. Fate wills it so.”

Rocket looked to Loki. Loki snapped his gaze back to his mug. “Your brother took the Tesseract from under his nose. No one’s ever made Thanos look the fool. He’s gonna come after him.”

“And I’ll kill him.” Thor stood. He bumped into something heavy. It moved from his path with a loud scrape. “He’s taken my mother, my father, my homeland…my brother is all I have left. He
will not have him. Know this, rabbit, I will have my revenge. When Thanos comes for the Infinity Stones I will slay him where he stands. He will die for what he has done.”

“Uh-huh…and what if you’re wrong?”

Loki had wanted to intervene then. He didn’t need Thor’s protection, didn’t want it either. What he wanted, was to mock Thor for thinking a new hammer would be enough to best Thanos. The Mad Titan was the most powerful Warlord in their sector of the galaxy. Even Odin was no match for him. Thor was running full speed toward death. Loki wished he could pry open his ribcage and crush what was making his eyes water. Loki didn’t want Thor’s protection. To protect something was to take harm in its place.

He was all Loki had left too.

But in the end Loki said nothing. He turned his back to the group and pretended he hadn’t caught a word of their conversation.

“Well if I’m wrong, and my brother is gone then…what more could I lose?” Thor asked. Loki ignored the wretched thing in his chest. It was creeping upward, so he took a sip of tea to keep it down.

“I could lose a lot,” Rocket said as Thor walked away. “Me, personally, I could lose a lot.”

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To Loki’s relief, the remainder of the trip passed in silence. A quick succession of beeps from the control panel indicated they’d arrived. “It’s dark,” Thor said. He rose from his seat and approached the windscreen. “Something’s wrong. The star’s gone out and the rings are frozen.”

Loki took in the stagnant rings surrounding the dying neutron star. Nidavellier burned forever bright. He’d never seen the realm in a state of darkness. Loki had had an inkling feeling about the origin of the Infinity Gauntlet. The state of Nidavellier confirmed his suspicions.

The pod circled to the entrance of the cold forge. The Dwarven guards that customarily glared daggers at him were nowhere to be seen. They journeyed into the depth of the forge, passing hundreds of full barrels covered by a thick blanket of dust. “Hope these Dwarves are better at forging than they are cleaning,” Rocket said. “Maybe they realised they live in a junk pile in the middle of space.”

Music from the Grootling’s game dispersed into the vast depository. Normally, Loki would shush him, but given that they sought a favour from Eitri, it was desirable to announce their presence boldly.

“This forge hasn’t gone dark in centuries,” Thor said.

“You said Thanos had a gauntlet, right?” Rocket asked.
“Yes, why?”

Loki turned at Rocket’s words too. “It look anything like that?” They followed the direction of the racoon’s paw. On a stone stand sat a large mould. The last time Loki saw what it’d cast, it’d been wrapped around his neck and glowing purple with the Power Stone.

“I am Groot.” The Grootling clutched his game close to his chest.

“Get back to the pod,” Thor said. A shadow crept up behind him, its footsteps muffled by leather. The shadow took a wide swing and batted Thor into a barrel. Loki rolled out of the way of the coming strike. It connected with Rocket and the Grootling, scattering them across the walkway. Loki recognised the familiar shadow. He was too exhausted for spells, so he reached into his pocket dimension. His fingers slipped past the Tesseract in favour of another glowing relic.

Compared to the raw might of the Space Stone, The Casket of Ancient Winters weighed right in his hands. His skin reversed to Jotun blue. Having accepted his heritage, the cold radiating from the casket was comforting. As a Jotun relic capable of vanquishing armies, the casket had been stored in Odin’s vault beside the Tesseract. The temptation had been too sweet to resist, so Loki gave into his opportunistic nature and nicked it.

A ray of frost froze the shadow in place. The mountain of a Dwarf shivered at the cold. Loki’s hands lingered on the casket a second longer than necessary. The frost crept up the Dwarf’s face and froze his beard too. “Greetings, Eitri.” Loki smiled as he returned the casket to his pocket dimension.

“Y-you dare…s-show you face…” The King of Dwarves stammered. Loki shrugged. He and Eitri hadn’t seen eye to eye for millennia, perhaps due to the projects he’d accidentally sabotaged, and the items he’d permanently borrowed.

“Brother, that’s enough.” Thor climbed to his feet.

“Thor!” Eitri’s brows shot up at the sight of his brother. Loki rolled his eyes. Wasn’t that always the case? He snapped his fingers and the ice immobilising Eitri receded. “You were supposed to protect us…” Eitri walked up Thor. “Asgard was supposed to protect us!”

“Asgard is destroyed,” Thor said. Loki took in the tears welling in both of their eyes, perhaps it’d been a blessing that he was spared the burden of a crown. “Eitri, the glove, what did you do?” Realisation dawned on the Dwarf’s weathered face. He stumbled backward, his footsteps shook the forge. Eitri retreated until he was backed up against a column, then slumped down on the floor. “Three hundred Dwarves lived on this ring. I thought if I did what he asked, they’d be safe.”

Loki scoffed. That was the last mistake he’d make on their behalf. Thor shot him an angry look. Loki raised his hands and backed away. He surveyed the full barrels and imagined the workers hauling it along by their stubby arms. They’d measure the contents meticulously then melt it with the heat from the star. Teams of master smiths would take turns to work the artefact. Each of the three hundred Dwarves knew their role by heart.

Loki kicked an ore of Uru from his path. But now the play had ended, and minus Eitri, there was no one left behind the curtains. It was inevitable. The Dwarves were a race that created power, not wield it. Their unmatched craftsmanship spelt their demise. If it wasn’t Thanos who slaughtered Eitri’s people, it would have been another Warlord. There was always a power-hungry mad man. Once upon a time, hadn’t he been one himself? It was foolish to flaunt an asset when one lacked the strength to protect it.
Loki traced the outline of the Tesseract with his mind. Inside the cube’s six modular planes, a voice called for him to meet his destiny. It promised boundless power, should he be brave enough to break the vessel. Loki tuned out the whispers and returned to the group.

“I made what he wanted, a device capable of harnessing the power of the stones. And he…and he killed everyone anyway. All except me.” Eitri raised his hands. They were hardened like metal. “‘Your life is yours,’ he said, ‘but your hands are mine alone.’”

“Eitri, this isn’t about your hands.” Thor took a step toward the fallen king. “Every weapon you’ve ever designed, every axe, hammer, sword…it’s all inside your head. Now, I know it feels all hope is lost. Trust me, I know. But together, you and I, we can kill Thanos.”

Loki took in his brother’s pleading eyes. The quiver in Thor’s voice punctured an invisible wall between him and Eitri. Loki had been the one blessed with the silver tongue, but Thor had his own way with words. Where Loki wove an intricate web of lies, Thor poured his heart into his speech. His brother inspired passion. Loki smirked at Eitri who’d climbed to his feet. There was more than one way of doing things.

“Come with me,” Eitri said. The master smith’s eyes burned bright with vengeance. They followed the Dwarf king into the heart of the forge, passing rolls of moulds stacked neatly upon shelves. The Dwarves archived their creations. Loki didn’t know if it was for vanity or because they wanted to entice future clients. Eitri punched a series of dials with his hardened fist. Mechanisms reached inside the shelves and lowered a stone block into the open.

“That’s the plan? We’re gonna hit him with a brick?” Rocket asked. Loki would never admit this to Stephen or Anthony, but he wished for the hundredth time that it had been the human couple who accompanied him on this trip. At least their incessant quipping wasn’t bruising to the mind.

“It’s a mould. A king’s weapon. Meant to be the greatest in Asgard. In theory, it could even summon the Bifrost,” Eitri explained.

“Did it have a name?” Thor asked.

“Stormbreaker.”

“That’s a bit much.” The raccoon mumbled.

“So how do we make it?” Thor paid the comment no mind.

“You’ll have to restart the forge. Awaken the heart of a dying star.”

“Rabbit, fire up the pod.” Thor took another look at the mould then lifted Rocket by the back of his vest.

“Hey put me down!” The duo made way for the escape pod while the Grootling followed. Loki stayed rooted to his spot. Eitri frowned at his lingering presence.

“Brother?” Thor asked as he realised Loki had fallen behind.

“I’ll stay here.” Loki plastered on an innocent smile. “Keep our dear friend company. We have much to discuss. You don’t need the Space Stone for starting the forge, do you?” Thor narrowed his eyes. Loki returned the eye contact. His mask didn’t budge under Thor’s scrutiny.

“I know you are up to something, but brother, the universe is—”
“Oh, spare me the lecture and get on with it,” Loki snapped. Thor was taken aback by the hostility. He considered the situation for another moment then shrugged and walked away. He hadn’t made Loki promise anything. By now Thor knew how little Loki’s promises weighed. Loki waited until Thor was out of earshot. He turned to the master smith beside him. “Now that the morons are properly distracted, we can discuss what I really came here for.”

Eitri eyed Loki with thinly veiled resentment. Loki shook his head and sighed. “I know you detest me. I assure you the feeling is mutual, but as Thor said, these are trying times, and for the sake of our continued existence, I hope you consider my next words carefully.”

Loki beckoned Eitri to follow him. They returned to the depository where another item of interest had been left to collect dust. Loki retrieved the Tesseract from his pocket dimension. The artefact’s soft glow illuminated Eitri’s guarded features. “These stones contain infinite power, capable of driving any mortal to madness. The same should apply to Thanos. It doesn’t, and not because he is a Titan, nigh immortal, but because of something you made. Thanos is the wielder of two Infinity Stones. That alone makes him the strongest creature in the universe. Earth has three.” Loki gestured to the other mould that had been sitting in plain sight.

“How long would it take for you to make another gauntlet?”

Chapter End Notes

We'll return to Earth in the next chapter.

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The Q-ship was preparing to dock when Tony finally managed to override its course. He grasped the control panel for balance as the ship veered to the right. The Q-ship was low on fuel, but he spent half of what they had left to leave Sanctuary’s domain as quickly as possible.

Tony had set Wakanda as their destination. He looked over his shoulder at the shrinking mothership. No one had left to pursue them. Their radio was silent too. Perhaps the aliens manning the docks knew better than to question a member of the Black Order. The trio sailed smoothly until they breached Earth’s atmosphere.

“Everybody hold on,” Tony cautioned. The Q-ship trembled as gravity pulled them toward the surface. Its alien cladding experienced little air-resistance. They dived for the lush jungle like a burning comet.

“Uh…Tony, we’re not slowing down,” Peter said. The four spider legs extending from his back had dug into the floor to hold him in place.

“I don’t think this rig has a self-park function.” Tony looked at the controls meant for Cull Obsidian. The two steering gimbals were spaced ten feet apart, and each was large enough to fit a human head. Tony took the right-hand one and slipped his arm into the gears. “Get your hand inside the steering gimbal. Close these around it,” he said to Peter as he secured the black latches around his arm. “You understand?”

“Yup, got it.” Peter copied Tony’s movement until his arm was swallowed by the gears.

“This was meant for one big guy, so we gotta move at the same time.” Tony tested his hold. It wasn’t stable. The gears were rattling around his arm. They struggled to cling to something so slim. The arm piloting it should’ve been four times its size.

“Okay…okay, ready?” Peter stabilised the rocking gears with his free hand. The jungle’s foliage was less than a mile away. The Q-ship pierced the incorporeal barrier that camouflaged Wakanda. The dense trees opened into a vast field of grass. Reality offered a better view, but it also presented them with fresh challenges. They were diving headfirst into a village. “We might want to turn—” Peter tugged at the gears. “Turn! Turn!”

Tony and Peter pulled the gimbals at the same time. The Q-ship jerked to the left, narrowly avoiding a cluster of shack on the outskirts. They cruised for another heartbeat, soaring past the village and scattering herds of goats. Tony could see the army of Outriders now. They were slamming themselves against the energy barrier as if they had no sense of pain. The colourless dome singed their bodies and severed the occasional limb that managed to squeeze through. Despite the piling bodies, more Outriders poured from the Dropships. They charged toward the dome, determined to rip it apart like a caste of termites.
“Can you slow us down?” Stephen asked as he searched the control panel. “I don’t see any brakes.”

“Won’t we need em.” Tony counted three Dropships in total. He gestured for Peter to steer them to the right, aligning the Q-ship’s trajectory with the Dropship in the middle. Silver nanoparticles covered his features. They solidified to form the helmet of Mark Sixty. “Let’s gate crash this party.”

Stephen smiled. “Always got to make an entrance.” An orange mandala appeared on his hand. The Master of the Mystic Arts duplicated them until they formed a sphere around the control panel. Tony looked to the side. Peter gave him a thumbs up. He, too, had closed his helmet.

The Q-ship carved into the soil, sending grass turf flying. It slid forth in the mud then collided with the central Dropship. The impact created a chain explosion that ignited both ships. Fiery debris rained onto the Outriders below, halting their attack. Peter yelped as fire licked the barrier from every direction. The mandala sphere was flung across the field. They landed among thick clumps of grass. Stephen released the spell, and the three of them rolled to a stop, dishevelled but unharmed.

“Wooo! How’s that for a driving lesson!” Tony cheered.

“We are not doing that again.” Stephen cracked his back as Tony helped him up.

“Come on, old man, you’ve got spunk for another round.” Tony yanked Stephen to his feet. He dusted the cloak off and surveyed the dome. The commlink on his HUD lit up again. Tony was reconnected to the feed.

Time to check up on his teammates. Tony tapped into Steve’s cam. The Avengers in Shanghai were fighting humanoid creatures in an open-air market. The aliens fit the description of Corvus Glaive and Proxima Midnight. An energy blast from Corvus Glaive’s, well, glaive, sent Steve spiralling into a stand. He crushed the display and landed on a pile of vegetable peels.

‘Captain Rogers, if I may advise you to exit the dumpster?’ Friday asked. Tony’s unapologetic snicker was thundering in the group com.

‘Very funny, Friday.’ Steve climbed to his feet. He re-joined the fight, teaming up with Clint against Corvus Glaive while Bucky and Natasha exchanged blows with Proxima Midnight. War Machine and the Falcon provided air support. A well-timed spray from Rhodey’s machinegun backed Corvus Glaive into a corner.

They seemed to be doing fine. Tony returned his attention to the field. The Outrider army had recovered from the explosion. A squadron diverged from the main army and sprinted toward them.

“Shuri, how’s the barrier holding up?” Tony asked. The three of them stood tall against the incoming Outriders.

“Energy output is steady. They tried to flank us, but none slipped through,” the Princess of Wakanda said. “Nice move with the ship.”

“For once, reckless driving pays off.” Tony’s left arm augmented into a repulsor canon. The squadron of Outriders collided with them. He blasted the nearest monster to smithereens then swung his canon sideways onto another enemy. Stephen conjured a flaming sword. He wielded the spell with deadly accuracy, decapitating an Outrider as he dodged its claws.

With stealth mode activated, Peter was gone in the blink of an eye. His wireframe figure on Tony’s HUD darted around the battlefield. Outriders fell to invisible kicks. “This is amazing! Best mode
Peter yelled. His immediate mastery of sneak attacks gave Tony an inkling that he might regret installing the mode one day.

Lured by the scent of exposed prey, more Outriders joined the assault. The three of them fought back to back, forming a tight circle. Peter swatted an Outrider to the side with his mechanical legs, but before he could turn his back, another two toppled him. They clawed away at the Iron Spider. Damaged nanoparticles switched hues from rock grey to woodland green. Stephen’s sword morphed into a whip. He lashed at the Outrider on the top of the pile. Tony followed with a cannon blast. They freed Peter at the expense of nearly getting overwhelmed themselves. The cloak yanked Stephen from the path of a claw. Tony took a few scratches, but none of the Outriders managed to pierce his armour.

“Get inside the barrier!” Shuri yelled. She was no doubt watching their feed. “I’m opening section G-12.” The segment of the dome behind Tony divided into clusters of tessellated planes. A hole opened thirty feet above ground. The Outriders that had been scratching at the dome converged beneath the opening. They stepped on top of each other and formed a mountain of overlapping limbs.

Peter webbed a decaying log and used it to club an Outrider in the face. He switched off stealth mode. The Iron Spider stopped flashing. Stealth tech was fragile, the internal wiring needed time to repair itself. “Kid, hop on!” Tony flew over Peter, who webbed himself to Tony’s leg. The cloak levitated Stephen into the air. They flew for the opening, narrowly missing the tip of the Outrider mound. Shuri closed the opening as soon as they were inside. The Outrider furthest along had been halfway across. The energy field sliced it in half.

“Jarvis, how’s the Hulk holding up?” Tony stepped to the side, dodging the legless Outrider that tried to claw him one more time before dropping dead. Bruce’s feed was dark. The Hulk wasn’t the best at maintaining technology.

“Dr. Banner is doing remarkably well. If one is to disregard the piling property damage.” Jarvis connected Tony to footage from a Stark Industries satellite. The Hulk and Cull Obsidian were brawling in Central Park. The pair exchanged brutal punches, tearing up trees by their roots and butchering the landscape. Neither of them respected the designated paths. They ploughed through pavilions and memorial sites alike. The Hulk threw Cull Obsidian into the lake as Jarvis zoomed in on the action. He jumped in after his foe. The force created a ginormous splash, tossing a paddling of ducks out of the water.

Tony grimaced. The PR team would have their hands full after this stunt. He looked to Stephen, who had also been observing the fight. Stephen gave him a thumbs up. Thank god for sorcerers that could rewind time.

The Guardians were next on Tony’s catch-up list. He tapped into Quill’s feed. It was dark like Bruce’s. That was…unusual. Quill hadn’t struck Tony as the type to be clumsy with technology. Did his earpiece get damaged in a fight? “Jarvis, where’s our space friends?”

“The Guardians of the Galaxy boarded the Milano thirty-six minutes ago. Their last known location was above the Indian Ocean, in pursuit of a third ship that had breached the atmosphere.” Jarvis displayed the coordinates on Tony’s HUD.

“And you never heard from them again?” Tony tried Gamora next. It was also dark. He cycled through all four members of the Guardians still on Earth and got nothing but static.

“I’m afraid not, Sir.”
“Tony.” Stephen’s call pulled Tony from his thoughts. Beyond the dome, the mound of Outriders had flattened. They continued to throw their armoured bodies at the barrier. The Outriders were intelligent to a degree, yet they willingly sacrificed themselves for a battle strategy designed to waste their lives.

The thin layer of sweat on Tony’s back was beginning to cool. He should put himself to use. Ebony Maw’s needles had stung, but they didn’t seem to leave any permanent damage. Now that he was reconnected with Jarvis, his trusty AI would alert him if his vitals were off.

According to his HUD, T’Challa was with the Wakandan army half a mile to their right. The warriors had formed a line around the border, picking out strays that’d managed to slip through. Tony took one last look at the shrieking army then turned to Stephen. “Take us back to New York. They’re not breaking in anytime soon.”

Stephen nodded. He lifted his hands, but just as amber sparks flew from his fingertips, something caused him to break his spell. Tony caught on a moment later. It was as if he’d muted his audio by accident, but in the seconds that followed, all that was audible were the faint beeps from his commlink.

The assault on the barrier had stopped. The four-armed beasts looked to the sky as if they were receiving instructions inaudible to anyone but themselves. A unified growl coursed through the army. Separated by a thin layer of energy, they could do no more than hiss at the humans across the field. After making their sentiment known, the thousands of Outriders flocked to the remaining Dropships. The obsidian pillars that’d been sunken into the earth disappeared in a blue beam of light.

“They…left,” Tony said, engrossed in the bizarreness of the Outrider’s retreat. Sixty seconds ago, thousands of extra-terrestrial monsters had been clawing away at the barrier. Now all that remained were dismantled body parts and the craters the Dropships had struck.

Tony enlarged Steve’s feed in Shanghai. The market had been flattened. Corvus Glaive and Proxima Midnight were trapped by the Avengers. Corvus Glaive was injured in the abdomen. Steve was holding his signature weapon as he bled bright blue blood onto the pavement.

‘We don’t wanna kill you, but we will,’ Natasha said.

‘I second finishing them off.’ Bucky raised his gun. He was halted by Steve.

‘Buck, that’s not who we are,’ Steve said.

‘It’s what they are, and what they deserve.’ Bucky nudged his chin at the defeated duo then shrugged. He didn’t seem happy with the outcome, but he lowered his gun.

“You won’t get this chance again.” Proxima Midnight surveyed the Avengers that surrounded her. Her gaze was as sharp as the edge of a serrated knife. It oozed a dark promise. She and Corvus Glaive disintegrated too. The glaive was ripped from Steve’s hand. It travelled up the blue beam to re-join its master.

Tony switched to the satellite footage of Central Park. Having lost his foe, the Hulk let out a furious roar. He growled at the policemen that’d finally summoned the courage to approach him. Sensing that playtime was over, the Hulk slumped down on the lawn. His bulky muscles shrivelled until he returned to the form of Bruce, who collapsed on the grass in exhaustion.

“It’s a full-scale retreat,” Stephen said.
“Yeah, but why?” Tony’s gaze lowered from Stephen’s face to the Time Stone that was hanging from his neck. It made no sense. The Sorcerer Supreme continued to guard time. The Mind Stone hadn’t left its container, which was sitting beside Shuri in the battle room. Loki possessed the Space Stone. The Infinity Stones had been what attracted Thanos to Earth, yet he left without obtaining any of them.

Tony was about to call Shuri to run a full diagnosis on Earth’s atmosphere when a distraught voice rang in the commlink. One by one, the Guardian’s feed flickered back online. The person that’d yelled sounded like Quill. His feed was looking at a burning wreckage.

“Hey Flash Gordon, you alright?” Tony asked. Quill’s perspective shifted from the flames to a pile of ribbons on the ground. Tony concentrated on the footage blurred by smoke. A cold lump formed in his chest. That wasn’t a pile of ribbons. That was Mantis, sliced into thin, boneless strips. “Is she —” Tony cut himself short as he noticed a dozen grey blocks scattered nearby, then half of Drax’s head. “Are they dead? Where are you?” Quill’s perspective remained stagnant for a moment.

“Quill?” Tony didn’t speak the language in the background, but it sounded like Hindi. To Tony’s relief, Mantis’ shredded form slowly contracted until she resembled a humanoid creature once more. She climbed to her feet as Drax pieced himself together.

Since he was looking from Quill’s perspective, Tony couldn’t see his face. He switched to Mantis’ feed. Quill’s jacket was ripped, and his shirt was smeared with dirt. His right hand was splayed across his chest. A faint, shimmering veil of red particles shrouded his body. Compared to his dismembered crewmates, Quill looked fine, but something about his unresponsive state made Tony double check his vitals. The man was breathing heavily. He took a tentative step forward then fell to his knees.

“Quill?” Tony had a fleeting suspicion that he knew what was wrong. It came to him then. The person he expected to see by Quill’s side wasn’t there. The Guardians were missing a fourth member. Quill’s red-tinted eyes were fixed to the burning wreckage. Mantis hobbled over to him. She placed a glowing hand on his shoulder. Quill gasped and coughed out more red particles.

“He took Gamora.” Quill yelled as if he’d been reconnected with his voice. “Stark, Thanos has Gamora.”

Chapter End Notes

The trailer for A4 dropped and I am not ready. D:>

On a side note, I love how both Tony and Stephen had directly quoted its title in previous movies. #TonyStarkWasRight

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
One…two…three.

Gamora spun the dual-edged switchblade with practised finesse. It slid between her fingers like a silver snake.

Three…two…one.

The blade returned to its original location, landing between her thumb and index finger. She withdrew the support of her thumb. The switchblade tilted to the side but doubled back before it could topple. The artefact rested on the tip of her index finger, perfectly balanced.

“Sixty seconds until landing,” Quill said from his pilot seat. Gamora pocketed the switchblade and checked her weapons one last time. She had been waiting for this day her entire life. Between her and Thanos, only one would walk away from this confrontation.

The Milano touched down on the edge of the city in stealth mode. This time no one stayed with the ship. The Guardians navigated the streets with great care. The dirt roads were empty save for the occasional pedestrian darting past them. Thanos’ personal ship hovered above them, blocking what little sun managed to filter past the dense clouds. Gamora checked the HUD that Stark gave them. Despite being within ten feet of her crewmates, her feed was the lone splash of colour in a matrix of dark screens. “The ship is jamming our commlink.” Gamora switched off her HUD and slid the thin piece of acrylic into her pocket.

“Guess we are on our own,” Quill said as he did the same. “We’re not getting anywhere like this. The city’s huge. Let’s find a better view.” The Guardians echoed Quill’s suggestion. They climbed an eight-storey building until they reached the rooftop then split to survey every direction.

“There.” Mantis pointed at the distance. Gamora ran to her. She followed the tip of Mantis’ finger. There he was, sitting on a pile of bodies, at the intersection three blocks down.

“That’s got to be a trap.” Quill exchanged looks with her. “I mean, look at him, he’s baiting us.”

“We have no choice,” Gamora said. “He’s alone. We know for a fact the Black Order is occupied. This is the best chance we are going to get.”

“Today, he pays for the deaths of my wife and daughter.” Drax had swung his leg over the railing when Quill got a hold of him.

“Drax, Drax, man chill the fuck out.” Quill wrenched Drax back from the edge of the building with Gamora’s help. He considered the rest of his crew and ran a hand over his mouth. “Fine, but we need a plan.”
“I’ll go in by myself. The rest flank him while he’s distracted,” Gamora said.

“What, no! That’s suicide.”

“You’ve got any better ideas?”

“I go in by myself.” Quill cleared his throat. “You guys, uh, ambush him.”

Gamora crossed her arms. They stared at each other while a distant explosion rocked the block. Quill threw his hands into the air. He turned to Thanos again, closed his helmet, and tapped the magnifying option. “There’s only a purple rock on his gauntlet. I’m assuming that’s the Power Stone.”

“Only one?” Gamora joined him by the railing. “Where’s the Reality Stone?”

“Don’t know. It ain’t with him. Maybe the Collector escaped, being the slippery bastard that he is.” Quill retracted his helmet. “With one stone, we might just stand a chance.” Quill held a hand up to Gamora’s face and kissed her. She closed her eyes on instinct. “Be careful,” he said after they parted.

Gamora didn’t pull away. She lingered on the rooftop, clinging to the softness the kiss had stuffed into her heart. It was intoxicating, this false sense of safety. When had the man become so important to her? She didn’t know. Maybe that was what family was. They find their way to your heart without asking for permission. Gamora wanted to tell him that. She considered him family. Not like the twisted, surrogate clan that had paraded as her family for all these years, but something real, like the woman that used to sing her to sleep on Zen-Whoberi, her biological mother.

I love you. More than anything.

“Remember your promise.” She switched her words last minute. Gamora leapt from the rooftop and landed on a balcony halfway below. Her cybernetics dampened the impact. She ran and vaulted over the cast iron balustrades, free falling for four storeys then denting the roof of a taxi. She withdrew Godslayer from its sheath. The familiar weight reassured her. She calmed her racing heart as she walked around the corner.

Thanos sat atop a mound of corpses. The bodies’ matching uniform suggested law enforcement. Strewn around him were empty bullet cartridges and deformed guns. “I knew you’d come.” Her surrogate father regarded her with sickening warmth. “There’s something we need to discuss, little one.”

Gamora didn’t give him the chance to continue. She sprinted then leapt for him with Godslayer raised high above her head. Thanos closed his fist. A wave of energy erupted from the gauntlet, blasting her down the street. Her forehead scraped against a collapsed wall. Gamora got up and wiped the blood from her eyes. She charged toward him again. This time Thanos didn’t cast her aside with the gauntlet. He rose with a sadistic smile and raised his fists to form a fighting stance.

Her battle cry pierced the air. She detached the knife from the hilt of Godslayer and dual-wielded both blades. Titan skin was even tougher than that of an Asgardian’s. She needed to be strategic about where she placed her cuts. Gamora slashed at Thanos with her sword and kept the knife free for openings. Then she saw one, Thanos threw his punch too wide, leaving her with a split-second gap. Gamora brought her knife upward. The tip of the knife nicked Thanos in the arm. In exchange, Thanos grabbed Godslayer by the blade. He closed his naked fist, and the blade that could slice through any metal broke in half. Thanos closed the gauntlet around her throat, lifting her into the
Now, Peter. Gamora couldn’t say the words aloud. She didn’t have to. A grenade landed behind Thanos, whose bulky form shielded her from the blast. The shockwave loosened Thanos’ hold. She sliced the wound that was on his arm again, drawing a deeper gash. He dropped her to the ground. He’d taught her everything she knew. Now he was going to find out exactly how formidable of a fighter she had become.

Gamora landed on her feet, nimble as a feline. She aimed for the spot above his armoured vest and hacked into his neck with the remnants of Godslayer. With a flick of her wrist, the switchblade he’d gifted her when they first met fell into her hands. She sank the spike into his heart. Thanos stumbled backward. His right hand tried to cover the cut that was gushing purple blood while his left wrapped around the switchblade.

“…why?” Thanos sank to his knees. He gazed at her with empty eyes. “Why you, daughter?”

Gamora’s heart hammered in her ribcage. She had dreamt of this day for years. She fantasied about it when she trained, imagining what it’d feel like to sink her blade into his chest. The sensation haunted her in her sleep, even as she sailed across the galaxy in the Milano, surrounded by people she loved. Now the moment was here, and Gamora couldn’t understand why her heart was laden with sadness.

Tears fell from her eyes, blurring her vision. She recalled the rare sessions that he’d train with her. When none of her siblings was around, that was what he’d call her.

Daughter.

Gamora dropped Godslayer. Thanos collapsed. His Titan form shook the earth. “That was quick,” Quill landed beside her with rocket boosters. Drax and Mantis followed him into the open. Gamora covered her tears with trembling hands.

He was no father. He got what he deserved. She said to herself.

Something in the atmosphere shifted, and a chilling breeze swept across the street. “Is that sadness I sense in you, daughter?” Gamora looked up at the incorporeal voice. “In my heart I knew you still cared, but one never knows for sure.” The deceased Titan disappeared in a cloud of red mist. The mist latched onto other objects, gaining momentum until it engulfed every element that constructed her reality. The pile of bodies was replaced by a handful of mutilated civilians. Distant screams mixed with the growl of Outriders to form a dismal cacophony. The buildings that’d seen light damage was burning to the ground.

“Reality is often disappointing. That is, it was. Now…reality can be whatever I want.” The Mad Titan appeared under the shifting limitations of matter. The golden gauntlet on his left hand glowed a sinister red.

“Thanos!” Drax let out a bold cry and charged. Before Gamora could warn him, Thanos closed his fist. It was as if Drax had run through a grid of knives. His body broke into two dozen modular blocks and scattered to the ground.

Thanos turned to Mantis, who’d just witnessed the dismemberment of her friend and was too horrified to run. “No!” Gamora yelled. Mantis was ripped to shreds by a wave of red particles. The remnants of her body were strewn across the pavement. Gamora dived for the stub of Godslayer, but Thanos grabbed her first. With a firm hand in her hair, he pulled her to her feet.
“Let her go, Grimace.” Quill pointed his blasters at the monster behind her.

“Peter…” Run. Gamora wanted to yell. *Run, you idiot. That won’t even scratch him.*

“I told you I should’ve gone,” Quill said. His eyes remained glued to Thanos.

“Now? Really?” Gamora struggled against her restraints.

“You let her go!” Quill shouted.

“Ah, the boyfriend.” Thanos inspected the gauntlet with an air of boredom. He’d seen this scene unfold hundreds of times. Gamora knew. She knew this because for the first half of her life, she’d been laughing at the sods trying to defend their loved ones by his side.

“No. Like to think of myself more as a Titan-killing, long-term booty call. *Let her go—*” Quill jolted his blaster.

“Peter…”

“—or I’m gonna blow that nut sack of a chin right off your face.”

“Not him,” Gamora whispered. Recognition flashed across Quill’s face. “You promised.” Gamora hoped the desperation in her voice matched the one she’d used on Vormir. Quill hesitated. “*You promised,*” she begged.

Thanos must’ve known she had the location of the Soul Stone. She’d tried her best to cover her tracks, but there were thousands of people from across the galaxy that she couldn’t erase. The extraction of the Soul Stone demanded a sacrifice. Gamora felt better for knowing this. Thanos doesn’t love anything, but giving away the information was unthinkable. What if he found a way to cheat the ritual? He always found a way.

She’d spent so long at the mercy of her enemies. She never wanted to return to that life again. Once Thanos had her, there would be no salvation.

“Oh, daughter. You expect too much from him,” Thanos drawled. He turned to Quill. “She’s asked, hasn’t she?” The fist in her hair tightened. She winced at the pain of her hair being torn out. Thanos dragged her forward until her face was inches from Quill’s blaster. “Do it.” He jolted her against the barrel. “Do it!”

Quill took his eyes off Thanos for the first time since he appeared. “I told you it should’ve been me,” he said to her.

Gamora closed her eyes. She recalled the words that she never had the courage to say. She’d never get another chance. “I love you. More than anything.” She gazed into his eyes as she murmured those words.

“I love you too.” Quill’s response didn’t miss a heartbeat. From the look on his face, he knew this was it. He lowered his blaster until he was aiming at her heart. Gamora smiled. He’d kept all his promises to her, of course he wasn’t about to let her down.

Before Thanos could taunt him again, Quill pulled the trigger. But instead of the deadly laser that’d pierce her heart, a string of bubbles escaped the tip of the blaster. The soapy spheres rose high into the air. They reflected an iridescent sheen, as innocent and playful as a child.

“I like him.” Thanos smirked. The blaster disappeared in a burst of bubbles. He tightened his fist
again and the red mist returned. They surrounded Quill, who dropped to his knees with his hands on his chest.

“No…” Gamora knew Thanos too well to not have guessed where this was going. “Leave him out of this.” She tried to wrench her scalp from his hold. “He doesn’t deserve this!”

“Where is the Soul Stone?” Thanos asked.

“I don’t know.” Gamora pulled harder. Strands of fuchsia locks fell to the ground. It wasn’t enough to loosen his hold. Strange noises were coming from inside Quill’s body. “Let him go!”

Thanos shook his head. “There’s something you should know. Some time ago, your sister snuck aboard my ship and tried to kill me.” Gamora ceased struggling at the mention of Nebula. She hadn’t heard from her since Yondu’s funeral. “And very nearly succeeded, so I captured her. She’s up there right now.” Thanos looked to the sky. He lifted Gamora until her legs dangled freely, and she was at eye level with him. “I found some interesting clips in her memory files. I preferred to do this with her, but we’ve wasted enough time. I will ask again, where is the Soul Stone?”

Despite the clarifying pain, Gamora couldn’t stop her voice from shaking. “Don’t do this.”

“Daughter…” Thanos regarded her with eyes colder than his stone throne in Sanctuary. “It’s not me that brought this upon him. It’s you.” Thanos closed his fist. Quill’s body rippled as if he was being torn apart at a molecular level. His left hand disintegrated. The corrosion crept up his arm at an agonising speed.

Quill let out a heart-wrenching scream. “Don’t tell him! Gamora, it’s not worth it!” Quill shouted as he clutched his injured arm. The corrosion ate away his collar bone. It travelled down his chest, exposing the white tips of his ribs. Gamora clenched her eyes shut. She tried to tune him out, but the voice that used to whisper words of comfort to her in the night was in so much pain.

The sound that left Quill’s lungs would follow her to the end of the universe. Gamora watched the man she’d sacrifice everything for thrash around on the ground. His legs kicked the pavement beneath him, trying and failing to alleviate the pain. His intact fingers dug into his leg as more skin evaporated into the air.

I love you. More than anything. Her tears blurred Quill’s face.

“Vormir!” Gamora shouted. “The stone is on Vormir!”

Thanos unclenched the gauntlet. The world came to a halt. For a moment nothing was audible, then the only thing she could hear was the weak huffs from Quill’s lungs. Red mist slowly repaired the parts of him that’d been torn apart. Bone, flesh, organ, skin…the parts rematerialized until Quill resembled a whole person once more. He rolled over to the side, gasping for air.

Thanos dropped her. He gave her a moment to compose herself. Gamora wiped the tears from her eyes. She must not show him any more weakness. She wouldn’t give him that. She’d cling to this last shred of dignity. It was all she had left. “Show me,” Thanos said. Gamora nodded. She rose to her feet and took in the sight of Quill’s chest, rising and falling with each laboured breath.

Coward, the voice in her head said. You begged him to kill you, yet you couldn’t watch him die. Gamora let out a humourless laugh. It was always easier to doom oneself. Perhaps she didn’t deserve to die among friends after all. With one last look at Quill, she turned her back to her crew and marched toward the Mad Titan’s ship.
Hey guys, so we are two to three chapters away from the BIG SHOW DOWN. The promised angst is coming very soon. >:D

On another note, I'm afraid I'll have to pull the two chapters in three weeks thing again. This is due to not having access to a stable writing environment. D:> I know exactly what's going to happen next, but I don't want the quality of my work to suffer due to external influences. We are so close to the end game I can sniff it in the air. Rest assured this period of turmoil will end soon. Until then, you guys can expect an update on the 28th of December, and another one on the 6th of January.

Thank you for being the most amazing readers ever. I wish you all an early Merry Christmas.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Quill had fired up the Milano when Tony, Stephen, and Peter crossed the portal. “What happened? You don’t look too good.” Tony approached Quill, who pulled the control column toward himself. Drax and Mantis had assumed their seats in the cockpit. Both Guardians looked shaken, especially Mantis, but she was holding herself together for the sake of her crew. Tony shuddered to think that moments ago, she had been a pile of strips on the floor. The Milano took off while the portal was still open, Stephen closed it quickly.

Quill kneaded his chest with the palm of his hand. “I’m fine. We need to get Gamora. If Thanos leaves Earth, it’s over. He has both the Power and Reality Stone. Minutes ago, he found out about Vormir.” Mentions of that god forsaken planet roused an uneasy feeling in Tony. He took in the target that had been locked by the Milano’s nav system. It was a shrinking dot in the distance. Thanos has gotten a considerable head start. They were losing him fast.

“Can you magic us closer?” Tony asked Stephen. The man beside him smiled. Stephen browsed the statistics on the display panels, focusing on their flight speed. Tony took a step back to give his partner space to manoeuvre. Stephen waved his left hand in perfect arches, while his right mirrored the movement with a calculated lull. A thin orange thread appeared in the air before the Milano’s windscreen. It spun until it transformed into a portal a mile wide. Stephen stared unblinkingly ahead. The delayed movements of his right hand caught up, and with the final arch, another portal appeared in the distant sky. The Milano dived into the first portal and shot out the second, eliminating hundreds of miles in the process.

“Woah!” Quill exclaimed. Their target was suddenly a tangible ship instead of a purple dot. Tony searched Stephen’s face for signs of discomfort. He hadn’t forgotten what happened the last time Stephen tried to transport something this big. The chunk of Leviathan might even be smaller than the Milano.

Stephen calmed Tony’s worries with a pat on his back. The Sling Ring clinked against Mark Sixty. The pat was deliberately rough. Tony shuffled his legs to stabilise himself. Stephen had an uncanny ability to read his mind, and Tony was okay with that.

“Let’s put the pedal to the metal.” Quill amped up the thrusters.

“You won’t have enough for return.” Tony noted the near empty fuel tank. The Milano consumed alien fuel. The Guardians hadn’t topped off their ship since they left for Earth. Quill didn’t respond. He kept his eyes trained on the closing ship before them. Tony ran a hand across his chin.

“Would you like to deploy the Iron Legion, Sir?” Jarvis suggested.

“Yeah, do that.” It was good to have back up, but Tony doubted they would make it in time. The Legion wasn’t outfitted to keep up with the Milano, and the closest squadron was ten minutes
away. In a standard encounter, ten minutes would be a dream response time, but at the moment, that was ten minutes Tony couldn’t spare.

The split second they flew within range, Thanos opened fire. Quill wove the Milano through the bombardment with the foresight and finesse of a master pilot. It was fascinating to watch him work. Tony was no stranger to aircrafts, but his speciality lay in piloting the Iron Man armour. It was much more difficult to be nimble with a large ship, as most of the manoeuvres came with a lull. From the moment Quill pulled the control column to the moment the Milano physically turned, precious seconds had slipped by. The man’s intuition was incredible.

“Die, Thanoooooorrrrh!” Drax yelled. He’d climbed into the neighbouring seat and was firing the submachine gun at the enemy ship. Instead of regular shells, bright orange flares left the onyx barrels. Plasma tech. Tony thought. It probably won’t scratch Thanos, but isn’t it a bad idea to attack while—

“Mantis, get him out of there! Not while Gamora’s still on the ship!” Quill yelled. It was a lost cause to reason with someone blinded by vengeance, Tony knew that too well. Mantis acted quickly. She climbed into the seat behind Drax and placed a hand on his forehead.

“Sleep,” Mantis commanded. Her antlers lit up. Drax sprung from his spot. He tried to resist the urge to nap, but ultimately fell victim to her powers. The grey alien fell sideways, sliding onto the floor with a heavy thump. He brought down a shelf of supplies in the process. Metal boxes bounced off the man’s naked chest. Tony winced on Drax’s behalf. He never got why the alien was topless. Perhaps Drax had thick skin, both metaphorically and physically.

“Just a little closer,” Stephen said. He was readying himself to portal the team inside Thanos’ ship. Though Tony had never practiced it, he understood the theory behind portal magic. For a gifted Master of the Mystic Arts to open a gateway, they must first envision their destination. Hence it was harder to conjure a portal to somewhere they’d never been. The difficulty level rose further when they were in a moving vehicle. Portals were fixed access points. It was their nature to remain stagnant. Shifting the portal in sync with the movement of the ship required immense concentration. “Just a little closer…” Stephen murmured. He lifted his hands the same time the Milano was struck.

Tony fell backward onto Peter. Stephen grabbed the side of Quill’s pilot seat. “Shit!” Quill steadied the ship and checked their barrier. Sixty-three percent. A single hit had docked a third of the barrier’s structural integrity. They were playing a deadly game of real-life Galaga.

“We’re almost there. Come on,” Tony said. The closer they were, the less room Quill had to manoeuvre. The Milano was struck a second time. One of their left thrusters blew out. Smoke drifted into the hull. An array of systems flashed red on the control panel. Stephen repeated the spherical shield he’d used to protect them during the Q-ship’s landing. Except this time the scale multiplied ten-fold to cover the entire Milano. Stephen’s hands shook fiercely. He crossed them in front of his chest and maintained the spell, warding off a third and fourth hit. Tony ground his teeth together. He wished there was something he could do to lighten the load, but he didn’t have an ounce of magic in him.

“You don’t know when to give up, do you?” Thanos’ disembodied voice resonated in the atmosphere. Quill had amped the Milano to maximum speed. He ploughed ahead, dodging fire where he could and taking hits where he couldn’t. Thanos’ ship was so close, if Tony busted out the windscreen at that second, he could make it.

Tony weighed the pros against the cons. He’d have to sacrifice at least one functional thruster to take someone with him. Tony doubted he could survive the firestorm with compromised
manoeuvrability, so if he was going, he was going alone. It’d be safer for the team if he attempted to board the ship solo. If he succeeded before he lost Jarvis, Stephen could even portal backup to his coordinates.

“I’m going in. Quill, turn the ship back.” Tony checked the ETA of the Iron Legion. Three minutes. He did a mental tally of the fuel in Mark Sixty’s thrusters and laughed. There was never enough for the return trip.

“Not a chance, Stark.” Quill kept his gaze on Thanos.

“Goddam it Quill. I have the best shot. I’m much harder to hit. Turn this ship back.” The hairs on the back of Tony’s neck stood up. The smoke was getting denser; the filtration system couldn’t keep up. The Milano rattled as if it was coming apart at the hinges. “I promise to do everything I can—”

“I like that about you,” Thanos drawled. “Resolve is a hallmark of the brave. It’s too bad you oppose my mission.” A purple wave of energy wrapped around the mandala sphere. Stephen’s eyes widened. His magic was an extension of himself. He felt what was happening before everyone else. The barrier cracked under the pressure of the Power Stone. Blood trickled from Stephen’s nose. The red stream flowed past his goatee and dripped down his chin. With one final push, the mandala sphere shattered. Stephen coughed out red-tinted saliva and doubled over.

Tony caught Stephen on his way down. “Stephen! Stephen!” Tony shook the man in his arms. Stephen’s head tilted to the side. He was unresponsive. Tony’s heart only started to beat again after Friday confirmed Stephen was alive, but unconscious.

“Estimated time of arrival, ninety seconds,” Jarvis updated.

There wasn’t another second to lose. The ship was coming apart and they’d just lost their primary shield. Tony’s gaze locked with Peter’s. The young Avenger was waiting for his instructions. “Take him, keep him safe.” Tony shifted Stephen onto Peter, who nodded with a pale face. He opened the emergency escape hatch in the hull. It was raining plasma outside. They’d never make it to the ground. “Listen kid, when the Legionnaires arrive, jump. They’ll shield you and carry you down. If there aren’t any left, Karen will open the chute when you’re outside firing range. Don’t open it manually, do you understand?”

“But—” Peter had clearly been expecting an assault related mission.

“Listen to me,” Tony hissed. “I’m trusting you with someone that means the world to me. Thanos cannot get his hands on Stephen or the Time Stone. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Peter croaked. The Milano jerked sideways as Quill dodged another stream of plasma. The pair grabbed onto the cables bolted to the walls to steady themselves.

Tony looked away after he was certain Peter understood the weight of his request. “Same goes for you.” Tony said to Mantis. “Take Drax and wait for my signal. Do you have a chute?”

“I’m not leaving Quill behind!” Mantis yelled through the heavy fire.

“Then put him to sleep!” Tony yelled back. Mantis looked torn as she shifted her gaze from Drax to Quill.

“The Legion has arrived, Sir,” Jarvis informed.

Tony looked toward the horizon. Two dozen blue and white suits of armour flew for them in a
beeline. The Milano had pierced the clouds. Any higher and they wouldn’t be able to go outside without a mask. “Now,” Tony said to Peter. Who tied Stephen to him with his spider legs and jumped. Five Legionnaires protected Peter’s flank. The first and second went down within seconds. They used themselves as mobile shields against the firestorm. Peter disappeared into the clouds. Tony let out a shaky breath and turned to Mantis.

“I’m sorry, but you’re not much use here.” Tony picked Mantis up and despite her protests, tossed her out of the hull. A Legionnaire caught her. Other suits of armour converged around their comrade with precious cargo. Drax went next. The snoring man put up less of a fight. “Alright, Flash Gordon, you’re going whether you like it or not.” Tony closed his helmet and walked up to Quill. The captain of the Milano hadn’t objected when Tony tossed his crewmates out. Perhaps he knew the fate he was flying into.

Tony placed a hand on Quill’s shoulder. “Stark, let me ask you this,” Quill said without taking his eyes off the flight path. “If it was Strange on that ship, would you turn back?”

The hand that had been set on prying Quill from his seat wavered. Would he? If it was Stephen on that ship? Stephen, who’d done the same for him mere hours back? Tony looked out the windscreen. Having lost a thruster, the distance between them and Thanos was greater, but the enemy ship was still within reach. “You’ll die,” Tony said.

“If you can make it, go. I’ll—” Tony never found out what Quill said next. The Milano was rocked by a blast that tore through its tattered shield. The blast ignited the hull. The structure around them groaned as if the Milano was crying for help. Quill’s leather jacket slipped past the tip of Tony’s fingers. In the split second it took for Tony to regain his hold, the seating man’s features were engulfed by flames. An explosion began at the engines and ripped the ship apart. The shockwave sent Tony spiralling into the distance. He tumbled in the strong currents, falling like a pinball.

Fiery debris scratched Mark Sixty. Tony grunted as he was bumped to the side. “Jarvis!” His HUD was dark. His arms and legs trusted at the air and caught nothing. Tony looked past the narrow eye slits of his helmet. All he saw was fire, and beyond that, the blue and white canvas of the sky. Where in oblivion was Quill? “Jarvis, buddy, now’s not a good time for a nap.”

“S—ss—sirrr.” His HUD flickered back online. The thrusters spurt out a huff of exhaust, then emitted steady propellant to keep him in the air. Tony twisted the armour to an upright position. Despite the malfunction, majority of the systems were intact. “Scanning for target…target locked.” Tony turned around. He followed the target marker and zoomed in on the region. Christ, he was tossed far. Quill was at least a mile and a half away. The man was falling like a statue. He was encased in a translucent blue net; some sort of alien body armour.

The explosion had taken out the last of the Iron Legion, if there were any left after evacuating the team to begin with. Jarvis couldn’t read Quill’s vitals from such a distance. He could be dead for all Tony knew. Quill was exposed when the explosion took place. Tony looked back up. Thanos’ ship was shrinking rapidly. He had a split-second decision to make. Tony amped up the thrusters and dove for Quill. The man had fallen into a towering cumulonimbus cloud. Tony followed suit. On the outside, the clouds were deceptively docile, but inside a storm was brewing, and the air was thick with moisture. “Target lost,” Jarvis said.

Tony searched the gaps in the vapour for that tell-tale hint of leather. No luck. “Where are you…” Tony mumbled. He flew in the direction Quill was last seen. The dense vapour was throwing off his depth perception, and turbulence made it difficult to tell if he was staying true to trajectory. He was never going to find Quill like this. Tony ground his back molars together. The longer he waited, the less altitude he had left.
Tony sped up. Mark Sixty punctured the cloud. The world beneath was an ominous grey. “Searching for target…” Jarvis said. The light was dying in whichever country they were in. Tony searched alongside his faithful AI. He spotted the luminous net first. The pale blue criss-crosses popped against its dark backdrop. “Target locked.” Tony dove for the marker.

“Come on, come on…” A tingling sensation crept up Tony’s back. The distance between him and Quill was uncomfortably familiar. He’d been here before; close, but not close enough. Twice already, he’d been forced to witness the people he cared for plummet to what could’ve been their deaths. He wasn’t about to add a third to that list. Tony morphed the thrusters on his legs into a single mega-thruster. With the remainder of his fuel, Tony shot through the air. He caught Quill and pivoted at a ninety-degree angle last minute. His armour scratched against the crowns of a dozen spindly trees. He had no more fuel left to dampen the impact of his landing, so Tony turned around and crashed into the dirt with his back. They slid in the mud for a few more seconds then came to a stop. Tony groaned as he flipped Quill off him. The suit had taken most of the blow, but he felt like he was about to come apart at the joints.

“Jarvis, vitals.” Tony retracted his helmet. He crawled over to Quill and tore off his mask. The body armour had deployed quickly. Beneath the net, only half of Quill’s body was burned. Though the charred skin looked bad. Blood was soaking through the blackened leather. And there was one slight problem. Quill wasn’t breathing.

Chapter End Notes

Here is the promised update. Let me know what you guys think of the story. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
It took two shots of the Extremis Super Serum to pull Quill back from death’s door. Small spikes repeated steadily on the electrocardiogram. Tony took in the man hooked to a twin IV drip, dressed in nothing but underpants. He thanked whichever deity was listening that they had Extremis at their disposal.

The lab appeared as if a torpedo had struck. Bruce was cleaning the bloodied equipment. A pile of rags lay on the floor. They had to cut Quill out of his old outfit along with the worst of the burnt tissue. The regenerated skin on Quill’s chest was pink, but smooth. A faint scent of singed flesh lingered in the air, mixing with the coppery tang of blood. His stomach coiled at the smell.

Tony took a step back. The movement caused him to wobble. He steadied himself with the workbench. “You should get some rest.” Bruce walked up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’ve been up for a day and a half.” Normally, his semi-Super Soldier stamina could take the forty-eight hour beating, but Tony was so tired. The pressure in his skull was excruciating. Had it really been only a week since Loki and Thor crashed through the sanctum’s roof? Life found creative ways to complicate things.

Tony grumbled in agreement. He left Quill with Bruce; the man was in capable hands. But instead of returning to the penthouse, he entered the room next door. Stephen lay flat on his back, wired to machinery to monitor his condition. Although he hadn’t woken since they returned, Stephen didn’t suffer many physical injuries. Peter had done a fine job at keeping him safe. The kid was asleep upstairs.

The cloak stood vigilant over its master. It hovered to the corner of the room at the sight of Tony, giving the pair some privacy. Tony nodded in thanks. Laying still like this, Stephen’s tall frame was no longer so authoritative. It struck Tony how much weight he had lost. Tony himself was far from peak condition, but for Stephen, his worries began months, or even years ago.

Tony ran his hand down Stephen’s gaunt features. His fingers trailed past the dark circle, the protruding cheekbone, then the sunken cheek beneath. Pain flared in Tony’s chest. It coursed through him like an electric shock. A sliver of doubt blossomed in his mind. The seed had been sown long ago.

What was the point of all this? Why did he fight, if he couldn’t protect the one person—

Tony shook his head clear of the poisonous thought. He and Stephen were Avengers, and leaders on top of that. It was their duty to protect humanity. If they ran, who would step up to take their place? He’d scoured the Earth to assemble his team. There was no running from infinite power.

In their mad rush to attend to Quill, he and Peter hadn’t cared where they shoved Stephen’s gurney. There was another one pushed to the side, the one Tony had slept on post-Vormir. He didn’t know
whether he should laugh because it saved him the trouble of fetching another, or cry because he needed it again so soon. He pushed the two gurneys together and told Jarvis to dim the lights. In the darkness, a familiar weight draped over him. Tony patted the cloak on the collar. “Everything will be alright,” he mumbled to all three of them.

Tony thought he’d have trouble falling asleep. A wired brain didn’t help with insomnia, but in reality, he was so beat up he blacked out within minutes. When he woke, there was a gentle tug at the end of his hair. Stephen was awake. His shaky hands played with the messy locks. Tony turned to the side, kissing the hand that was conveniently within reach. Stephen smiled at the touch. “Glad you could join us, Mr. Stark.”

“Hmmm…” Tony wiggled over and propped his head on Stephen’s lap. Morning grogginess was best countered by waking to a face he was glad to see. “No one told you to stop.”

Stephen raised his hands in surrender, then continued to play with Tony’s hair. Tony let out a deep breath. Stephen had a magical touch, and not because he was a Master of the Mystic Arts. Some of the pressure in his skull melted away. The good times didn’t last.

“Friday told me what happened,” Stephen said with the rue of someone who had no choice but to bring up the subject. Tony stared at the weavings of Stephen’s robes. “There was nothing you could have done.” Tony buried his face in the fabric until his stomach protested.

They made their way to the penthouse kitchen with Tony lingering two steps behind Stephen. How was he going to face the Guardians? He’d asked for their trust. Tony didn’t regret evacuating the Milano, but in the process of doing so, he’d failed more than one mission.

Luckily for him, the lounge was empty. Wong had collected the scattered crew from the jungle and returned them to Stark Tower, where Bruce awaited with Extremis. “Where are our guests?” Tony asked. He pulled out a bar stool while Stephen surveyed the contents of their fridge.

“Mr. Parker hasn’t left his room. Dr. Banner is in your private lab, along with the remaining members of the Guardians of the Galaxy. Mr. Quill has yet to wake,” Jarvis said.

*The remaining members.* Tony was certain Jarvis hadn’t meant to phrase it like that, but the words still stung. He’d been the only one in the position to rescue Gamora, and he failed her. She and Thanos were now headed for Vormir. After Thanos learned of the ritual, he’d have no more use for her.

Stephen pressed the expresso button. Two streams of coffee flowed from the machine. The pair of ceramic mugs were jarring to the sight. Two days ago, he had shared the same coffee with a woman who was no longer here. He’d promised to get her.

“There was nothing you could have done.” A warm embrace wrapped him from behind. “Trust me, I know.” Tony leaned against the man that’d made his way around the counter. He didn’t know about before, but apart from waiting, there was nothing he could do now. The Milano went up in flames and Loki kept the Space Stone. Thanos was both physically and metaphorically out of their reach.

Tony hopped off the bar stool. He couldn’t afford to mope like this. The toughest battle has yet to come. He needed to pull himself together.

Neither of them was in the mood for a gourmet meal. Stephen tossed a packet of dry spaghetti into the pot and brought them to a boil. Tony helped by dicing the tomatoes. They made enough to go around, then sat down with their plate and ate in silence. The quietness was broken by a snicker.
“What’s so funny?” Tony asked.

“It’s Thursday, our pasta day.” Stephen lifted a forkful of spaghetti, coated in red sauce. “Admittedly, this is not my best effort.”

“We’ll do better next Thursday.” Tony stuffed the pasta into his mouth without caring much for how it tasted. Once he got his stomach to work again, it was digesting food like a black hole.

Stephen regarded the sloppy sauce with an absent expression. “Yeah…next Thursday.”

Tony slowed his chewing. Before he could say anything, Peter walked in. The kid was sporting the first pair of dark circles Tony had seen on him. He waved to Tony and Stephen and yawned. His face brightened when he saw the covered pots.

“Help yourself, kid,” Tony said. Peter loaded his plate with a mound of pasta and joined them at the island. The kid was pale, and the way his head bobbed made Tony think he would fall into his food. “Rough night?”

“Yeah, didn’t get much sleep,” Peter said as he ate. “It’s just…all these images keep flashing in my head, and these voices shouting. I’ve never had anything like it.”

Tony stared at the red mess on his plate. What was he going to tell the kid, that he knew this day would come? Tony had been hoping to shelter Peter from the repercussions for as long as possible. He wished he could tell Peter that everything would get easier, that things would sort themselves out, but the truth was, the weight piled up over the years. Guilt and trauma were the companions of experience. It only ever gets worse.

“MIT is staring at you in the face.” Tony pushed the spaghetti around with his fork. Peter shot him a dirty look. “But in all seriousness, it’s not too late to quit. Our work is not easy. You’ll be doused with mortal danger, crushed beneath things every other week… There’s always someone to save. The longer you’re in the field, the more you’ll be forced to pick and choose.” Today, when that choice had been forced upon Tony, he’d chose Quill. He couldn’t watch Quill fall to certain death, but wasn’t he subjecting Gamora to a fate much worse?

“How do you know you’ve made the right choice?” Peter asked.

“You don’t,” Tony said with finality. “That’s what being an Avenger boils down to. You do your best. Sometimes that best is not enough.”

What happened on the Milano hung above them like a silent shadow. Peter pursed his lips. “It’s not right to run just because it’s hard. Someone has to make the hard decisions. If we all turn our backs, who’s going to help the little people when they need it the most?”

Tony gave Peter a pat on the shoulder. Kids were the future, and it was because of kids like Peter that he was no longer afraid to grow old. “Finish your food, Underoos.”

“Hey! You promised to stop calling me that!”

“I said no such thing, Spiderling.”

He and Peter quipped through the rest of their meal. By the time they finished stuffing themselves, even Stephen had lightened up. The three of them loaded their plates into the dishwasher. Peter was cycling through the settings when thunderous crash shook the penthouse. A fresh Mark Sixty erupted from Tony’s arc reactor, shielding him in the blink of an eye. The Cloak of Levitation darted for Stephen. Peter didn’t have the Iron Spider, but he’d gotten into the habit of always
wearing his web shooters.

The trio rushed outside, but instead of Thanos, an Asgardian with cropped blonde hair and shining armour lowered his war axe. His red cape rippled in the wind. The familiar crest of the Bifrost sizzled on the decommissioned landing strip. Beside him stood a racoon, a tree, and another Asgardian donning a golden gauntlet. A single blue stone decorated the back of his hand.

“About damn time.” Tony retracted his helmet. He approached the quartet when the electricity crackling around them waned.

“Did we miss the party?” Thor enveloped Tony in a bruising hug.

“Oh, it was quite the party,” Tony said. He turned to Loki. “Tell me that’s what I think it is.”

Loki replied with a mischievous grin. “That depends, Anthony, what do you think it is?” Tony rolled his eyes so hard it might as well have gotten stuck in his skull. Loki flexed his fingers. The plates on the miniaturised gauntlet shifted with his movement. “’Tis a fine artefact Eitri crafted. Well worth the wait, no?”

“He should patent that, start a product line. Overlords tend to be loaded.” Tony nudged his chin toward the penthouse and turned on his heels. The group followed.

“How fares your trip to Vormir?” Loki asked.

“Yeah, about that... There’s bad news and worse.” Tony supposed he should get this whole thing over and done with. “The bad news is we didn’t get the Soul Stone. To extract it, someone had to sacrifice the person they loved. None of us bit the bullet.”

Loki’s gaze flicked briefly to Stephen. “And the worse?”

“Thanos is there as we speak. If his ship flies as fast as the Milano, he should be on the return leg.”

“How’d he find out where it was?” Rocket asked.

“He has Gamora.”


“We tried to rescue her. It didn’t go as planned. The Milano was destroyed, and Quill got pretty banged up.” Tony looked anywhere but Rocket’s eyes.

The racoon cleared his throat. “Knew the morons couldn’t do anything without me.” Rocket let out a humourless laugh as his paws picked at the latches on his gun. “How’s Quill taking it?”

“He doesn’t know.” The group resumed walking. Tony pushed open the glass door that led into the lounge.

“Sir, Dr. Banner requires your presence. He has urgent news to share,” Jarvis said.

“Is Quill up?”

“Mr. Quill regained consciousness moments ago. However, he is not the source of the news.”

“Group catch up it is.” Tony jabbed the down button on the elevator shaft. Rocket and Groot deserved more information than the three sentences he could offer. It was best if they heard the story from their captain. The ride downstairs passed in grim silence. Tony squeezed out the
elevator when it was halfway open.

The lab felt as suffocating as the box he’d just escaped. Bruce stood rigidly with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He barely acknowledged the group that entered. Drax was slumped on a chair, his head buried between his hands. Mantis looked unsure of what to do with herself. Quill had his back to the door. He was still in his underwear, sitting on the bench he had been resting on.

A projection of a woman Tony had never seen before held the room’s attention. She was piloting a tiny ship and enduring heavy enemy fire. Her skin was stitched from alternating ribbons of blue and purple. Cybernetic implants replaced the tissue around her left eye. They covered her temple too, then extended to the back of her head. “Quill, you have to listen to me. Gamora is dead,” she spat as she veered her ship to the left, briefly losing her enemies. “Thanos took her to Vormir. He came back with the Soul Stone, but she didn’t.” Quill kept his head down. His expression was unreadable. He swung his legs off the workbench. Mantis caught him as he tripped over himself.

“Sir, permission to deploy the remnants of the Net?” Jarvis asked. A nearby workbench came to life with images from Stark Industries satellites. The woman’s ship was nearing Earth. Two Q-ships followed.

“That’s Nebula, Gamora’s sister. We can vouch for her,” Rocket said.

“I am Groot!” Groot pointed at the enemy ships and dragged his thumb across his throat.

“Let her through. Concentrate fire on the Q-ships,” Tony ordered.

The Net was a shadow of its former self, but the remaining orbs managed to keep the two ships at bay. As the enemy fire thinned, Nebula returned her attention to the screen. “I escaped while they were gone, but I bugged the system on Sanctuary. I saw it, clear as day. There were three stones on his gauntlet.”

There was grim a determination in her eyes. Tony recognised that look. It was the same one Yinsen had given him. The man went out fighting terrorists with no armour and a dated rifle. The only difference was, Yinsen had wanted to reunite with his family. Nebula wanted Thanos to suffer.

She gripped the control panel so tightly, it dented the metal. “My sister won’t want us to throw our lives away. Thanos is too powerful now for any of us to take on alone, but together, we might still stand a chance. Together, we can avenge her.”

Chapter End Notes

It is upon us! The Big Fight! >:D

The next chapter will be the beginning of the final descent. This is the angst warning I've been waiting to put up. Brace yourselves, friends.

I'm having a moment of déjà vu. I remember walking out of the cinema, post-Infinity War, and plotting this fic in two days. I had envisioned this fight so vividly then, and now I finally get to write it. Thank you to everyone who has followed this story till here.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
The white-hot laser sliced through the tip of the sceptre. It severed the first of the three nodes that clasped the almond-shaped gem in place. Nineteen individuals from across the galaxy watched unblinkingly. Shuri’s lab was silent save for the soft sparks.

The beam travelled, unfazed by the attention it held. It fizzled to nothing after severing the final node. The gem fell from the sceptre, landing on the workbench. Shuri pushed the holographic controls away. “Energy signature is stable.”

Thor plucked the gem from the smoke-blackened surface. He examined it first, holding it with the tip of his thumb and index finger. When the artefact didn’t react, he closed his fist around it and applied pressure.

“How do you feel?” Tony asked. A muffled crack sounded inside Thor’s fist. When the God of Thunder opened his hand again, a stone the colour of sunlight rested in his palm. “Quick, dump it on the gauntlet. You don’t wanna be touching that thing.”

Thor walked up to Loki, who lifted the gauntlet. The Mind Stone flew toward the empty slot like a bird returning to its nest, settling in with a crisp clink. Thor wiped his hand free of the shattered gem.

The room’s attention turned to Stephen. The Master of the Mystic Arts opened the Eye of Agamotto. Stephen’s features were tinted green from the glow of the iris. With a twist of his hand, the Time Stone was detached from the relic that had housed it for centuries. The final of the three stones Earth possessed took its place beside Space and Mind. A surge of energy coursed through Loki, causing his hair to ripple.

“How do you feel?” Tony asked.

Loki opened his mouth, but no words came out. He flexed the fingers of his covered hand. The stones lit up one by one. “Imbued with power,” he finally said.

Tony released the breath he had been holding. Disaster befell beings who wielded one Infinity Stone incorrectly. The King of Dwarves did a fine job, and that mastery over his craft was what had led his race to ruin.

“Alright, we’ve done all we could. Everyone get some final shut-eye, it’ll be a tough day ahead,” Tony said. The team had gathered to witness what would be a defining moment in history. Some of the tired faces looking back at him nodded, but none left the room. It seemed they could all use some company during these dark hours.

Tony had jumped so many time zones in the past day; the black of the night alarmed him more
than it tired him. The people in the room formed clusters with those they held most dear. Majority of the Shanghai group stuck together, while the Wakandans chatted quietly among themselves. The Guardians had welcomed Nebula with solemnity. She didn’t seem to mind, being the sternest of them all.

Tony cracked his neck. His entire body was stiff from head to toe. He walked toward Stephen but halted at the sound of his name. “Anthony…” Loki approached him with Thor in tow.

“Yeah?” Tony squared his shoulders. A hesitant Loki? That didn’t bode well.

“I wish to discuss the coming battle.”

“I’m all ears.”

Instead of waiting for Tony to finish, Stephen came to him. He placed a quivering hand on the small of Tony’s back. Blocked by Tony’s form, the hand was impossible to detect by those who stood opposite him. It was a gesture they’d developed over the years, a way for Stephen to silently convey support. His warmth radiated through the black undersuit, and Tony leaned into the comforting touch.

“After much deliberation, my brother and I concluded that it’d be best if I…parted with the gauntlet.” Loki shifted his weight from the ball of one foot to the other.

“Oh.” At least three questions sprung to Tony’s mind. He settled with: “Well, who’s gonna use it?” The pointed look Loki gave him lingered too long to mean anything else. “No, I mean—what?”

Tony took a step back. He looked to Stephen, who raised a single eyebrow. “Now that’s a bad idea if I ever heard one. I’m a squishy human, remember? I can’t hold one stone without bursting into flames.”

“The gauntlet mitigates the side effects. You will be granted full access to the stones’ might, regardless of species,” Loki said. Thor nodded in support of his brother’s statement.

“You don’t understand. I’ve had…run-ins with the stones before. It didn’t end well. I’m the least qualified person to do this.” Tony turned to Stephen, hoping he would talk some sense into the duo.

“Anthony.” Loki took a step forward, closing the gap Tony had created. The plea in his eyes pinned Tony in place. “When I first held the sceptre in my grasp, it whispered to me. The honeyed voice urged me to reclaim my rightful throne. I escaped imprisonment because the Mind Stone beguiles all it touches, and for years I deceived myself, thinking I was not to blame.” Loki bit his bottom lip. His breaths were shallow and slow.

“Since Ragnarök, I’ve come to accept that my actions were my own. The Mind Stone fuels my desires, but it was me who craved to rule. The temptation calls still. True power…is best suited to those who do not seek it.” Loki took off the gauntlet. He turned the gauntlet’s opening to face Tony, who stared at the shadowed cavern. Was it illusion the cavern stared back?

“I can’t.” Tony shook his head. “I’ll do anything to improve our chances, but this doesn’t help. Ask Rogers, or Rhodey.”

“I will not leave my fate to those I do not trust. If you refuse to wield the gauntlet, then I shall wear it to battle. Return it if you must, I simply ask that you consider it,” Loki said. He held the gauntlet out to Tony, who took it reluctantly. The Aesirs turned on their heels, leaving Tony with an artefact that could bend the universe to his will.
The heavy gauntlet weighed down his hands. At a loss for what to do, Tony turned to the person he trusted the most in the world. “What do you think?”

“Would you like to wield it?” Stephen regarded the gauntlet with distant coldness.

“It all comes down to me then?” Up close and dormant, the Infinity Stones appeared like pieces of jagged rocks. It was madness to think the baubles controlled aspects of the universe, and that in their naked form, killed any mortal who came into contact. Tony was mesmerised by the gleaming colours. Time… Space… Mind… How easy would it be to slip his hand into the gauntlet and…?

Tony nearly dropped it at the thought. “Nope, still a bad idea. I shouldn’t be trusted with all this power.” He stuffed the gauntlet into Stephen’s arms.

“Then return it,” Stephen said.

“If it’s so simple.” It occurred to Tony that out of the two of them, Stephen had always been the more reliable one. Not that Tony didn’t have his bouts of genius, but Stephen was in a league of his own. He was a steady performer and could be trusted no matter how dire the situation. His will was uncrushable. It took a special kind of man to use endless looped death as a bargaining chip.

Stephen held the gauntlet like any other relic in the sanctum’s collection. It was natural to him, he’d been guarding the Time Stone for six years. “Maybe you should use it,” Tony said.

“It can’t be me.” Stephen placed the gauntlet down. Tony’s anxiety levels soared at the sight.

“You should hold onto that.” Tony reached for the gauntlet, but Stephen stopped him. He’d let go of the gauntlet to hold something else instead. Stephen pulled Tony in by the hips and kissed him. Tony jumped at his fiancé’s enlarged face. So rarely did Stephen indulge in public displays of affection. Though Tony supposed the others were probably too busy with themselves to notice.

Tony cupped Stephen’s cheeks, feeling the man’s goatee rub against his own. Stephen wasn’t wearing his signature scent, yet he smelled like the safe harbour that had sheltered Tony in so many storms. The kiss ended as the two of them came up for air. They pressed their foreheads together, lingering in each other’s space.

“I love you,” Stephen whispered. Tony’s throat closed up at the words that sounded too close to a parting promise.

“We’ll make it,” Tony said. He shuddered at the alternatives. The universe’s destiny would be reshaped by this time tomorrow. For better or for worse, he had done all he could.

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Tony stood tall in the meadow. The wind bellowed, and coarse grass stalks slapped against his thighs. The sky was pale in the early hours of twilight, granting an ashen quality to the faces of his comrades. Wakandan days might be pleasantly warm, but their nights were less amiable. Some of that chill managed to crawl into Tony’s insulated armour. A restless jitter gnawed at his heart.
Avengers were stationed across the frontlines in three clusters, spearheading the Wakandan army.

Tony had returned the miniaturised gauntlet to Loki. The prince donned the artefact with furrowed brows. Tony felt especially sorry for him. It wasn’t pleasant, being stuck with responsibilities he wanted to avoid. If Tony could help him, he would.

Outside the dome, Dropships impaled the earth. “Yibambe!” T’Challa chanted.

“Yibambe!” the Wakandan army echoed. They stood in a practiced grid, dressed in war outfits custom to their tribes. There was the white fur of warriors led by a man named M’Baku, the blue capes of men equipped with energy shields, and the flame red armour of the Dora Milaje.

“Yibambe!”

“A towering Titan emerged from the woods. The back of his hand was decorated by glimmers of purple, red, and orange. Tony swallowed at the sight of the Soul Stone. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. How could Thanos have done it? Pushed the daughter he loved to her death? Why did the Soul Stone accept his offering? If a person loved, wouldn’t they do everything to keep their beloved safe?

The Mad Titan was flanked by Cull Obsidian, Corvus Glaive, and Proxima Midnight. His children marched with a thirst for blood in their eyes. “Told you we should’ve finished them off,” Bucky said to Steve.

Rocket cleared his throat. “Okay, time for a plan.”

“Now you want a plan?” Peter turned to face the racoon.

“I’m gonna lay a trap. And to do that, I’ll need wires, an extra couple of batteries, and that arm.” Tony followed the trajectory of Rocket’s claw. He found Bucky, who stared wild-eyed back at him.

“You need my—you couldn’t have asked an hour ago, when we were back in the lab?” Bucky clutched his arm protectively.

“Hey, genius strikes whenever genius strikes.” Rocket shrugged. He held out his paw. “Now give it here.”

Quill hadn’t recovered from nearly dying or the news of Gamora’s death, but his head perked up at the conversation. “Zip it,” Quill said to Rocket. He turned to Bucky. “No, he doesn’t need it.”

“What’re you talking about, Quill? I need it.” Rocket’s wink was so obvious, Thanos would have seen it.

“I can see you, you know.” Bucky’s features scrunched together.

“Crap. I’m using the wrong eye again, aren’t I?”

“Kids? Concentrate, Hubba Bubba’s a mile away.” Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Did he really have to deal with this now? And he thought he was spontaneous. Tony relinquished a pearl-sized chunk of nanoparticles then stretched it as far as it would go. “Here’s your wire.”

Quill fished out a handful of glowing cylinders from his belt. “And here are the batteries. Do
Rocket took the items. “Relax, Quill. When have I ever come up with something that didn’t work?”

“Eh, pretty often? I can think of two instances off the top of my head. Just because you winged our escape from Kyln, doesn’t mean—” Quill’s words were interrupted by a crackling noise. It was coming from above them. A discerning ripple coursed through the dome. The smooth hemisphere pixelated into hexagons, then disappeared one by one.

“Brother, our barrier is down!” Shuri said in the group coms. “Running diagnosis…”

There wasn’t a need. Thanos’ gauntlet was glowing purple with the might of the Power Stone. He’d crushed Stephen’s shield so easily. They could no longer hide inside the dome like a turtle in its shell. Their enemy demanded an audience.

Thanos continued to march with his children. Tony took a tentative step forward. His pounding heart settled with each step that followed. He didn’t have to look to know his team was right behind him. They met in the middle of the meadow, standing ten feet apart.

“Stark,” Thanos said.

“You know me?” Tony held his head high and challenged.

“I do. You’re not the only one cursed with knowledge.”

“My only curse is you. That ends here.” Tony didn’t want to fight. He never did. Not everyone that stood behind him would walk away from the battle, but Tony had long accepted the necessity of it. History’s deadliest madmen were the ones that thought themselves righteous, their cause just. There was no swaying Thanos. The price of peace was high. Better them paying it than the universe.

“Surrender the stones, and you will be spared from further bloodshed,” Thanos offered.

“And watch you murder trillions?”

“With all the six stones, I could simply snap my fingers, and they would all cease to exist. I call that mercy.” Thanos raised his right hand. The three stones on his gauntlet mirrored Loki’s. “It’s a simple calculus. This universe is finite, its resources, finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correcting. It needs…balance.”

Thor pushed to the front of the formation. His eyes shone bright with the force of lightning. “What of Eitri and his people? You promised to spare them. He forged you the gauntlet, yet you slaughtered not half, but all the dwarves. Where was your balance then? Where was your mercy then?”

“To save the universe, sacrifices must be made.” There was a hint of sorrow in the Mad Titan’s features. “Today I lost more than you could know, but now is no time to mourn. Now, is no time at all.”

“Spoken like a true hypocrite,” Tony said. Thor breathed in heavy bursts. His cape was worn on the edges. Once a bright red, the outerwear was stained dark by the grimes of travel. The King of Asgard had watched his homeland burn. What did Thanos know of loss?

Thor raised Stormbreaker, the prize of his quest. “You are no saviour. Only a power-hungry madman. Your reign ends here!” Thor leapt into the air. A crackle of electricity erupted from
Stormbreaker. The war axe summoned the might of the sky. Seven streams of lightning converged at the tip of the axe, and with a swing of Thor’s arm, the beam surged toward his foes. It struck Thanos in the chest, flinging him backward. The roar of thunder echoed across the battlefield.

Proxima Midnight climbed to her feet. She snuffed the flame that was beginning to catch in her hair. She raised her spear, and a distant rumble neared. Tens of thousands of Outriders poured from the Dropships, their armoured bodies a swarm of shadows under the twilight sky.

Goosebumps crept up Tony’s spine. That was an army at least twice as big as last time. Left unchecked, they’d flatten Wakanda. “Rhodey, Wilson, crowd control!” Tony yelled. He took off and fired three missiles at the densest parts of the army. T’Challa had long evacuated the city, but critical support members like Shuri had chosen to stay behind. With the dome gone, there was nothing separating them from the monsters.

“For Wakanda!” T’Challa yelled.

“For Wakanda!” the army echoed. Beast tamers riding rhinos charged down the grassy hill. They paved the way for the foot soldiers. Soon the frontlines would be a chaotic flurry of blood and claws.

Air support had a short window until friendly fire would restrict their movement. Tony made use of the precious seconds by deploying the largest missiles in his arsenal. Rhodey and Wilson shared similar thoughts. The shoulder latches of War Machine popped open. Miniaturised grenades fell from the cavity while Rhodey took a dive for the army. He left a trail of fire in his wake. Wilson deployed all three Redwings to gain visuals over the battlefield.

A shockwave knocked Tony off trajectory. He quickly balanced himself. Thor hacked away at Thanos, who was on the defence. Loki snuck in blows when there was an opening. Quill, Nebula, and Drax circled the trio, dodging the occasional blast of energy. They kept their distance due to the unpredictability of the clashing powers, but it seemed they hadn’t given up on striking the killing blow. Fuelled by vengeance, the five had no eyes for anyone but Thanos. It was up to the rest of the team to keep the Black Order in check.

Tony flicked to Stephen’s feed. Stephen and Peter were keeping Corvus Glaive occupied. Mantis kept to the backdrop, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. In the distance, the Hulk and Cull Obsidian crashed into the woods. They exchanged feral punches. The Hulk had been furious for having allowed his foe to escape. He demanded a rematch, and Cull Obsidian happily obliged.

Steve, Bucky, Natasha and Clint resumed their fight with Proxima Midnight. “You should’ve killed me when you had the chance!” Proxima Midnight taunted. A bolt of energy erupted from the tip of her spear. It struck Clint in the abdomen. Bucky let out a miffed tsk then sprayed her with his machine gun.

Beneath him, the rhinos clashed with the Outriders. Tony let out a quivering breath, then returned his attention to the task at hand.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you guys think! ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Tony circled the battlefield, picking off stragglers as the Wakandan army clashed with Outrider claws. The air was thick with fumes. His teammates held nothing back, pepper ing the landscape with explosions. Tony pivoted toward Stephen when Rhodey and Sam competed for his role. 

Corvus Glaive fought with the ferocity of a rabid coyote. He lunged for Stephen, the tip of his namesake weapon glinting with cosmic energy. It was rumoured that the glaive could sever anything. Tony morphed his repulsor cannon into a shield and landed in front of Stephen. He angled his body to the left, clearing the path of the glaive. True to Gamora’s warning, the glaive sliced through his shield as if it was thin air. The severed chunk of nanoparticles dissolved when it touched the ground. They returned to Tony as a silver stream of metal, fusing with his thrusters and becoming one with his suit again.

“Watch out, Goth Smurf’s got a sharp knife,” Tony said. Stephen conjured a mandala on each hand. A burst of mystic energy stuck Corvus Glaive’s feet in place. Peter made use of the opening. He swung around his immobile target, shooting webs that bound his hands too. Tony grabbed the glaive. Its master held on tightly.

“Now!” Peter shouted.

An amber ring of sparks appeared above them. Mantis dropped from the portal, landing behind her target. She hovered a hand atop each of Corvus Glaive’s temple then commanded: “Sleep!” Her antlers shone bright with the force of her intention. The power travelled through the thick fabric of Corvus Glaive’s hood. Tony could pin point the exact moment he went under. His grip grew limp and Tony yanked the glaive from his grasp. The weapon that could sever anything proved itself yet again. With a thrust of Tony’s arm, the tip pierced Corvus Glaive’s chest. He fell to the ground, dead.

“You are the strongest Guardian. You know that, right?” Tony turned to Mantis, who beamed at him. He gave her a pat on the back and took off. That was one down, three more to go.

Stephen and Peter joined the assault on Thanos. “Hey, watch the string!” Rocket scolded in the group com. Tony flicked to Rocket’s feed. He caught a Wakandan soldier stumble to a halt. The soldier shot Rocket a dirty look before engaging with another Outrider. A glint of silver shone an inch above the ground. Tony followed the tell-tale hint of colour. It meandered across the field, tangling with several Outriders. “Let’s start this light show.” Rocket’s little paws plugged two things together. Tony couldn’t see well from the skewed perspective, but the batteries that had been hooked to Rocket’s belt lit up. A bolt of electricity coursed through the wire. The Outriders jolted stiffly, then collapsed with black smoke rising from their heads. Rocket cackled in the backdrop as Groot turned three Outriders into a skewer. Tony miniaturised Rocket’s feed. The duo was sure having fun.
A nearing scream snapped Tony’s attention back to the field. He caught Peter, who had been flung from the scene. “You okay, kid?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Tony,” Peter said. Tony lowered him onto the grass then accelerated toward Thanos. Nanoparticles flowed up his spine and down his arms. The repulsors morphed into a pair of jackhammers. Tony slammed Thano's off balance then ducked out of the way.

Drax reacted swiftly. The seasoned warrior skited across the grass, placing a cut behind Thanos’ knee. Thanos fell to the ground with a hand over his hamstring. Above him, a dark cloud formed. The God of Thunder harnessed the energies of the sky. Stormbreaker shone in the twilight like a tangible shard of lightning, and Thor brought down the war axe in an earth-shattering smite.

Confronted by such an immense force of nature, Thanos did not panic. He closed his fist and the Power Stone lit up. A surge of purple energy dissolved the cloud. Thanos climbed to his feet. He collected the purple essence in the air then flung it at Thor, who crashed into the forest in the distance. Thanos made use of the remaining power by shooting it skyward.

“What’s he doing?” Tony asked. “There’s no one up—”

“Sir, we’ve got incoming.” Jarvis constructed a wireframe model of the moon. Chucks of the sphere flaked away and gravitated toward Earth, burning as they breached the atmosphere. Tony looked up. A cluster of meteors whirled toward them, casting a stippled shadow over Wakanda. There was no telling what an impact event of this scale would do to Earth’s biosphere.

Loki reacted before Tony could yell instructions. The back of his hand shone blue with the Space Stone. A rectangular plane appeared in the sky, absorbing the meteors as they came, and deflecting them elsewhere.

That was some finesse. Tony turned to Loki, ready to congratulate him on the timely intervention. His heart skipped a beat as a hand closed in on Loki’s throat. “Lokes!” Tony fired his repulsors at Thanos, only for the Titan to flick it aside. Loki whipped around, but he’d realised too late. The hand brushed past his hair and reached for the gauntlet. A stream of molten lava struck Thanos in the side. The heat was enough to singe even Titan skin. It gave Loki a brief window to activate the Space Stone again. He reappeared on the other side of the field, then nodded toward Stephen in thanks.

The Master of the Mystic Arts drew an amber line in the air. He spun it into a mandala, and a vertical plane of crystalline reflections appeared before him. The Mirror Dimension, Tony thought. What a bloody great idea. Stephen pushed the plane toward Thanos, attempting to trap him in the alternate realm. The plane was crushed by the Power Stone. Thanos wielded his gauntlet as if it was second nature. Both Power and Reality lit up, and the contrasting powers engulfed the remnants of the Mirror Dimension. The three forces twisted together until they formed a whirlwind of sinister energy. Thanos hauled the churning colours at Stephen. It swallowed all signs of life in its path, leaving behind a trail of barren dirt.

Stephen called forth a ball of mystic energy. Against all logic, the ball shrunk as Stephen strengthened it. Blood pulsed in Tony’s veins. If that thing touched him... The whirlwind neared, but the Master of the Mystic Arts did not rush. He released the seemingly insignificant spell. The aqua coloured energy neutralised Thanos’ strike. The whirlwind was placated into a gentle breeze, and its belligerent colours muted. A flock of butterflies formed in the air. The shimmering creations fluttered past Thanos, forcing the Warlord to shield his eyes.

With a dropped jaw, Tony watched Stephen levitate into the air. Stephen crossed his arms, but seven more pairs fanned out behind him. Stephen folded the circle of limbs back in, and each pair
of arms grew into a spitting image of himself. Tony marvelled at the nigh identical creations. They surrounded Thanos, then each lashed out with a crimson whip. Thanos roared as his form was bound by the overlapping whips. He closed the gauntlet with great effort, creating a shockwave which disrupted the images and jolted Stephen out of the sky.

This time Tony was fast enough. He caught Stephen, who panted in fatigue. He’d performed a string of powerful spells. “You need some time out?” Tony asked without taking his eyes off Thanos. Quill and Nebula were keeping the Titan occupied.

Stephen shook his head. Tony dropped him to the ground. “Don’t let him close his fist,” Stephen said to the cloak. The sentient relic made a beeline for Thanos. It wrapped around the gauntlet, distracting Thanos and allowing Nebula to unleash her fury. The woman hacked away with her sword, creating an array of cuts. Quill fired a magnetic clamp at Thanos’ right foot while Drax anchored his left. Tony darted for the remaining free limb. The colossal arm was as strong as it looked. Tony morphed his boot thrusters into spikes then dug his heels into the dirt, gaining enough traction to hold his position.

The air came to a halt. Thanos kicked and pulled, but even a Titan was no match against the combined might of five beings and a relic. “Stephen!” Tony yelled. The man in question didn’t need to be asked twice. Stephen raised his left hand then drew circles with his right. A ring of sparks formed around Thanos’ naked arm. The Titan’s eyes widened, his irises reflecting the golden gauntlet. The portal snapped shut, severing the limb that was halfway across. A gush of Titan blood splattered over Tony’s helmet.

The gauntlet fell to the ground. It bounced on a turf of grass then rolled to a stop. The golden metal was smeared with blood and dirt, but the stones shone forever bright. In a desperate display of might, Thanos uprooted Tony’s spiked thrusters and flung him into Quill. The Mad Titan kicked Drax in the chest, then swung with his remaining hand, sweeping Nebula aside. Thanos lunged for the fallen artefact. Tony followed suit, but they had been too far apart. Thanos’ fingers ghosted across the gauntlet, but it fled from his touch as if it had a mind of its own.

An invisible force lifted the gauntlet. It shook its interior free of the severed hand then took off in the opposite direction. Tony watched the bizarre scene unfold. Realisation dawned when his HUD identified the culprit. “Tony, what should I do with this?” Peter’s voice rang in the group com. Clad in the invisible Iron Spider, Peter sandwiched the gauntlet under his arm and bolted. He left a trail of footprints in the grass. The young Avenger ran in a wide arc, keeping Thanos on his tail, but not leaving the stunned Avengers’ reach.

“Kid, hold onto that thing, do not let Thanos have it.” Tony fired three cannon blasts in quick succession. The two blasts that’d stuck knocked Thanos aside. Tony merged both cannons into a photon blaster. The mechanics inside the wide opening whirled, converting Starkium to energy at a rapid pace. Tony rarely used the photon blaster. It packed a devastating punch, but like the Unibeam, it took time to build up power. Quill, Drax, and Nebula sprinted toward their sworn enemy. Though none of them was fast enough.

A bolt of lightning struck the plains, and within it, rode the God of Thunder. Stormbreaker siphoned daylight from the atmosphere. As the battlefield grew darker, the war axe shone brighter. Electricity danced on the honed edge, calling for enemy blood. Thor’s eyes glowed with power Tony had only seen in the murals of Asgard’s throne room. With a mighty cry, Thor flung Stormbreaker across the field. His heart was sure, and his aim true. The war axe buried into Thanos’ chest. Blood spluttered from the Mad Titan’s lips. He sank to his knees as Thor landed before him. “I told you…” Thor said as he pushed Stormbreaker further into the wound. “You’d die for that.”
Thanos let out a wail of agony, but Thor did not waver. He pushed until only the handle of Stormbreaker was visible. Tony touched down on the ground. Had they won? Surely not even a Titan could fight with a wound so grave. Thanos coughed. Blood dripped from his lips. His expression was unreadable under Thor’s shadow. Slow but bold laughter escaped his throat. Thanos lifted his head, and his lips had been stretched into a mocking grin. He raised his handless arm. Blood oozed from the open wound, but Thanos didn’t seem to mind. His arm dipped slightly, and a crisp snap echoed. The handless Titan evaporated into a cloud of red mist. Thor inspected the pristine Strombreaker. The gauntlet that had been hovering in mid-air dissolved too. Peter switched off stealth mode. He rubbed his hands together, unsure of where the gauntlet had gone.

“The stone promised insight into each being’s soul, past, present, and future. The stone delivers.” Thanos materialised into existence. There was no wound on his chest, no missing hand on his arm. The Soul Stone glowed orange on the hand that was wrapped around Loki’s throat.

“Brother!” Thor sprinted toward Loki, only to halt as Thanos jolted his prisoner in warning. The skin on Loki’s face had reverted to Frost Giant blue. His right arm hung limply by his side, while his left grasped the vice that was squeezing his lungs close. “You…will never be…a god,” Loki rasped.

Thanos ignored the taunt. “That’s a fine weapon. Crafted by Eitri, I assume? That’d teach me to leave loose ends next time.” Thanos lifted Loki toward Thor. “Your brother’s life, or the axe.”

“No,” Loki choked out.

Thor’s mouth opened and closed. He shifted in his spot. “If you do that he’s as good as dead,” Nebula warned.

Thanos furrowed his brows. “What a waste of parts.” He raised the gauntlet, and a wave of red particles phased through Nebula’s body. She crumbled apart, leaking motor oil and blood onto the grass. Tony didn’t think she was going to get back up like the rest of the Guardians.

Loki wheezed as the hand around his throat tightened. His ruby eyes were stained dark red by the ruptured blood vessels. His feet thrashed in the air. “Stop!” Thor yelled. He dropped Stormbreaker, dispersing the energy gathered around the war axe.

Thanos smirked as red mist corroded the only weapon that could harm him. The gauntlet on Loki’s broken arm crumbled apart. Time, Space, and Mind flew into Thano’s hand. He tossed Loki aside. Thor rushed to his brother’s side, helping him up only for Loki to stumble back down. The vibrant stones spun mid-air in a perfect triangle. One by one, Thanos merged them with his gauntlet. As the final stone clicked in place, a wave of white energy coursed through the plains. Thanos inspected the world as if he was seeing it for the first time. Tony flew for him in a vain attempt to stall the inevitable. He was swatted aside like an insect.

Imbued with the power to reshape existence, the Mad Titan roared. He snapped his fingers, and white light swallowed everything in sight. When Tony came to his senses again, Thanos and the Outrider army were gone. The field was littered with bodies both alien and human. The remnants of the Wakandan army tended to the wounded.

“Where did he go?” Steve limped up to them, followed by rest of the Avengers that had been battling Proxima Midnight. The alien lay dead behind the group. Sweat rolled down Thor’s pallid features. “Thor,” Steve said as he surveyed the empty plains. “Where did he go?”

“Something’s happening.” Mantis hunched low. She wrapped her arms around herself and searched
for the thing that had triggered her senses. Tony searched with her. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until Bucky took a stiff step forward, and his mechanical arm dissolved into the air.

“Steve?” Bucky called. The decay spread to the rest of his body. His machinegun dented the dirt as he could no longer carry it. Bucky collapsed into a pile of ash. Steve sank to his knees beside where his childhood friend used to stand. He stared at the grey matter, looking, but not seeing.

“I am Groot…” Twenty feet to their right, the crown of Groot’s head began to flake away.

“Oh… No, no, no!” Rocket stumbled toward Groot, but he was too late. His final hug slipped through his crumbling companion. “Groot, no!”

Thor shuffled backward. He pulled Loki along, as if distancing him from the circumstance would protect him. “Brother.” Loki’s footsteps faltered. His bloodshot eyes locked with Thor’s. They gleamed with a layer of moisture that couldn’t quite bunch into beads. “It was my fault. I’m sorry. For everything.”

“Stay with me. No, Loki, stay,” Thor pleaded, but colour faded from his brother’s eyes. A web of cracks spread through Loki’s ashen features, and wind scattered his raven locks. Thor watched the last member of his family sift through his grasp. He opened his mouth in a silent scream.

One by one, the Guardians vanished. Mantis was the first to go. She reached for her captain, but her last words died in her throat. Drax regarded his decaying limbs with an absent expression. He succumbed to the same fate. “Steady, Quill.” Tony’s heart pounded in his chest. The captain of a ship no more sat cross-legged on the grass, surrounded by the ashes of his crewmate. When his turn came, Quill looked to the sky in elation. He couldn’t protect his friends or his lover, but in a realm beyond the living, perhaps they could reunite, and roam free in the galaxies once more.

“Tony…”

No… Tony thought as he turned. Not him.

“I don’t feel so good.” The helmet of the Iron Spider retracted, revealing a ghostly face. Peter hobbled up to Tony. The boy with the spider sense was once so quick on his feet.

“You’re alright.” Tony caught Peter on his way down. The kid had been the best of them. He didn’t deserve this.

“I don’t wanna go. I don’t wanna go, sir, please. I don’t wanna go…” Peter mumbled feverishly. His voice cracked and he begged and begged. His hands clung to his mentor’s shoulder, the mentor that was supposed to protect him. Tony wanted to provide at least a word of comfort, but his throat closed up and nothing came out. Peter had always been too kind for his own good. He took in Tony’s panicked expression and grew quiet. The arm on Tony’s shoulder flaked apart. With one final nod, Peter looked the other way. “I’m sorry…”

Tony’s hands pressed through the crumbling mass, coating his fingers with the ashes of his protegee. Why? He dug his nails into the dirt. His vision blurred, and he bit down on his lips to hold himself together.

“Tony.”

Tony would recognise that voice anywhere. Oh God, why? The tears he refused to cry fell from his sockets. He knew what was next. It was the only thing left that could hurt him. His chest muscles cramped, sending shots of debilitating pain through his heart. Tony looked up. Stephen’s legs wobbled as he took a step toward Tony, then tumbled to the ground. Tony reached for the person
he’d give anything to keep safe. The man beyond his fingertips gazed back with empty eyes.

“There was no other way.”

It began with the hands that’d hold him when he was injured; then the chest he’d lean on when the going got too tough; then the cheekbones he’d kiss while standing on his toes. Colour faded from the man he was going to spend the rest of his life with. Stephen blinked, and his lashes scattered into fine grey flakes. It all happened so quickly. One moment he was there, returning Tony’s gaze, and the next he was gone. His body crumbled apart. The winds carried him away, taking what was left of Tony’s mind. Tony lunged forward, but the ashes had dispersed. They caressed his skin in a soft farewell, then dissolved into nothingness.

Why? They had done all they could. Why was this happening? Tony inspected his hands. Perhaps he was next. He waited, when the moment passed, and he was there still, he lifted his fingers to his face. He’d give anything to take their place. Why did it have to be them?

Amidst the chaos, confusion, and cries for help, a gentle glow beckoned Tony to focus. When had the stone on his engagement ring taken on a different colour? The diamond set in the centre of the band twinkled with flicks of green and yellow, lively like new growth after an unforgiving frost. Tony gasped as the light absorbed the ashes on his hands. It grew stronger until a spinning vortex appeared. At the centre of the spiral was the glowing stone. It cracked open, releasing an unquantifiable amount of energy. The energy pulled Tony into the vortex and he descended into darkness.

Inside the vortex was a different world. Tony spun alongside stars, entering and leaving worlds old and new. He was as large as a luminous gas cloud and as small as an atom. He felt the gaze of interdimensional beings on his back. They judged but did not interfere.

There was no hint how long the journey would take; no light at the end of the tunnel. Tony slipped through the cracks of the Multiverse, spinning, falling, and travelling toward a destination he did not choose. Faces morphed into existence beside him. They vanished just as quickly. Tony, a voice called. You do your best. Sometimes that best is not enough, said another. I love you. The whisper sent shivers down Tony’s spine. He reached out, trying to hold onto the fleeting images, trying to make them stay.

What for? He heard himself ask. The man who’d stood by him through thick and thin smiled.

You’ll know… In time.

Chapter End Notes

Um...I'm sorry.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

It might be a bad idea to read this update in public...

Beta'ed by:

Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony opened his eyes. There was no fire, no dust. His ears were filled with the fading echoes of devastation, but there was no war here, and the moment seemed to still. A band with an intact diamond fit snugly around his ring finger. Wind howled of loss and a home far, far away. The great star in the sky was eaten by a black eclipse, tinting the atmosphere with slivers of fuchsia and orange. A man stood at the apex of a cliff.

No.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut then opened them again.

No, no, no, no. There must be a mistake.

“This surely, couldn’t be it?”

“There is no other way,” Stephen said, the blue shadow under his eyes a reminder of what would come to pass. This was no dream, nor was the people that had vanished before Tony’s eyes, “Of the billions of futures I saw, our only way to succeed requires you to wield the Soul Stone,”

Stephen continued, giving Tony no time to make sense of the situation. “This was why I sent you back.”

Stephen prised off the Cloak of Levitation. It flew by in a red blur. Tears from another lifetime fell from Tony’s eyes. “This is your plan? You stupid man.” He stumbled forward. He never got a chance to say goodbye. Beyond the cliff framed by two gargantuan pillars was a drop so deep, Tony couldn’t see the bottom. A thin layer of snow gathered on Stephen’s greying hair. Tony reached out, and arms wrapped around him in a cold embrace. He clung to the man with all his strength. It pressed the arc reactor into his chest, squeezing the breath from his lungs. The familiar feeling of suffocation returned, but Tony held on.

“No one else will do. It has to be you. For half the universe to live, I must die,” Stephen said, trying and failing to suppress the quiver in his voice. Did he have any idea what he was asking of Tony? To kill him with his own hands or watch him die as the result of their failure. How could he expect Tony to choose?

“No one else will do. It has to be you. For half the universe to live, I must die,” Stephen said, trying and failing to suppress the quiver in his voice. Did he have any idea what he was asking of Tony? To kill him with his own hands or watch him die as the result of their failure. How could he expect Tony to choose?

“Why?” Tony buried his face into the crook of Stephen’s neck.

“It isn’t fair, I know, but Tony…I saw annihilation. Half the universe, gone. This is the only chance we’re going to get. Please, this is no time to be selfish. One life, for the life of trillions, it’s a price I’m willing to pay.” Stephen clung to Tony just as tightly, but his words tore apart Tony’s tattered heart. Tony stood there. His nails dug into Stephen’s robes, twisting the fabric until it ripped.

Why.

He gazed into the drop. His panicked breathing forming an echo in his ears. With every inhale and
exhale, his mind pulled him back to the ash laden battlefield. Tony covered his ears, yet the harrowing wails found their way in still. They’d never see their loved ones again either, but they didn’t get a choice. What right did Tony have to cling to his happiness? How could he hold on, when he knew their sorrow was his fault?

Tony’s hold loosened. A bout of clarity struck him then. He’d clung to Stephen so tightly, because deep down, after seeing what his selfishness had wrought, he knew there was only one answer.

They couldn’t always win. Sometimes, they save those they could, then accept the losses and live with it. Wasn’t that what he told Peter? Peter. He’d be saving Peter too. He’d be saving Loki, and Bucky. The majority of the Guardians had turned to dust. He’d be saving Gamora, Nebula, Groot, Mantis, Drax, Quill, and the trillions around the universe that would vanish with them.

He loved Stephen. But love was not enough.

He had to let him go.

Tony blinked. The movement disturbed the snow that had settled on his lashes. They weighed the same as ash. “I’ll find you. I swear; I’ll keep looking until I do. This isn’t it. This isn’t goodbye.” Through the layer of moisture that blurred his vision, Stephen smiled.

“I’ll be waiting.” Stephen kissed Tony’s hand then placed the hand in front of his chest. He walked Tony backward, one step at a time. Tony wanted to scream at the wrongness of it all, but his throat wouldn’t make another sound. They walked. Stephen held Tony’s gaze. There was no pain, no fear, only fondness. Stephen’s boot scraped the edge of the cliff. With another step, he tipped backward. The feeling of fabric pressing against Tony’s palm vanished. Tony stared at the emptiness. A second ago, a man had been there.

Tony’s frozen legs quivered as he took the final step forward. He stood at the edge of the cliff and looked down. The clouds had parted. In the ring etched into the stone plane below, was a man dressed in navy robes. Blood pooled under his head, leaking into the cracks of the altar.

Tony sank to his knees, nausea overwhelming his senses. His environment dissolved away. After what seemed like eons, water began to leak into his under suit. The black liquid carried a bone-deep chill. Tony kneeled in a puddle, amidst an endless expanse of rippled sand. The altar was nowhere to be seen. Above him, the eclipse had expanded, corroding the ring of light that once hugged the circular void. The only source of illumination came from beside him. Tony raised his ringed hand.

The Soul Stone glowed gently in his palm.

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Tony didn’t know how he made it home. Quill and Gamora must have found him and took him aboard the Milano. The trip back passed in a blend of movement, images, and distant whispers. For the most part, Tony locked himself in the cabin he and Stephen used to share. He answered to no one, ate nothing, and stared at the door as if Stephen would walk in any minute.
The Milano landed in Stark Tower sooner than Tony expected. He followed the Guardians into his own home like a Legionnaire on auto-pilot. What was he doing here? What right did he have to return after everything that had happened? So many had perished during the battle, and even more after the battle ended. Thanos got what he wanted. Half the universe. But Tony didn’t get to live out the aftermath. He was once again sent coursing through the Multiverse, having no control over his actions and no say in what was to become of him.

Green and yellow. Time and Mind. Time to send him back to the opportune moment, and Mind to protect his knowledge of the future. Such a powerful spell defied the natural order. Last time it had costed the lives of Stephen and Vision, this time, it was Stephen and Peter.

Stephen.

Tony didn’t pay attention to where he was going. Turned out the Guardians guided him into the living area. “You guys are back!” a cheery voice called. The owner of the voice leaped from the couch. He shot a web at the ceiling and swung for the group, his chestnut hair fluttering in the breeze. He was so animate, so lively, but a day ago his ashes had coated Tony’s hands. It was his lifeforce that had fuelled Tony’s journey back home. “How was your trip?” Peter’s footsteps wavered as he took in the state of the group. He counted the people who’d returned, and the smile slowly faded from his lips. “Where’s…Stephen?”

The innocent question was worse than any accusation. There was no blame in Peter’s voice, but Tony’s mind filled in the blanks. How could you have let this happen? Didn’t Stephen mean anything to you? You promised to keep him safe, yet you turned around and pushed him to his death. Hypocrite. You’re no better than the enemy you sought to destroy.

Something in his eyes made Peter take a step back. Tony opened his mouth to explain. He had no choice. It was that or worse. He didn’t want to. He would’ve given anything to take Stephen’s place.

Warmth radiated through his under suit. It jolted Tony from his thoughts. Quill had placed a hand on his shoulder. The captain of the Milano, ignorant of the things that’d come to pass, shook his head at Peter. The gesture of kindness was too much. He didn’t deserve this. He watched all of them die.

Tony fled from the scene. He had no destination in mind, but his legs remembered his home. They bought him to the place he returned to after every battle. The master bedroom was exactly how he’d left it in another lifetime. It was a bad idea, coming back here. For six years he and Stephen had shared the same space. The other man was not here. He’d never be again, but at the same time, he was everywhere. On a chair by the window, a tome from the sanctum lay open on the upholstery. A navy cardigan draped over its backrest. Stephen’s tea cup still held the remnants of his last beverage. Their Starkpads were stacked together on the dresser.

That was all Stephen would be now, memories. Tony covered his face with his hands. He sank to his knees at the entrance of the room. What was he doing here? He had no right to come back.

“Boss…?” someone said from the speakers. Friday.

A part of Tony wanted her to leave him alone, though the other parts knew better. She wouldn’t have asked unless it was important. Tony looked up, clenched his fists, and blinked away the wetness. “Yeah?”

“Before he left, Doc had left a message for you. He asked me to relay it only if he doesn’t return.” His Starkpad lit up. Tony took the glowing screen and sat at the foot of the bed. He followed
Friday’s instructions. It took him to Stephen’s private folder.

Despite it being private, Stephen never set up a password to protect it. There wasn’t much inside. Unlike Tony, who named things on a whim and never adhered to conventions, Stephen labelled files appropriately. There was a folder for pasta recipes, another for surprise events. One stood out among them. It was called Tony.

Tony opened it. The wetness returned with a vengeance. The first thing he saw was a document called Operation: Proposal. Stephen had planned their itinerary at the Great Barrier Reef down to what they’d have for dinner each night. There were snapshots of locations on the island, with pros and cons listed below them. Stephen had scouted the area beforehand. Tony could recall so vividly, his surprise when the ring descended from the sky like a fallen star. But as the source sustaining the magic died, the twinkling stopped, and the star on his hand became just another rock.

There was an unnamed video clip in the folder. With trembling fingers, Tony tapped twice. The clip opened. The camera shook as Stephen placed it on his nightstand. He was sitting inches from the spot Tony occupied. If he turned, maybe Stephen would be there. The thought tempted him, but Tony remained perfectly still. Better to cling to delusions than be confronted by a shattered dream.

“Tony, if you are watching this, then I’m no longer with you.” The man in the clip looked to the side as if he wasn’t sure this was a good idea. He let out a ghost of a laugh. “First of all, because I know you’ll be blaming yourself, I want you to know this isn’t your fault. None of it is. You’ve made the right choice. With four stones Earth will finally stand a chance against Thanos.” Stephen took off his Sling Ring and fiddled with the top plate. Tony didn’t dare blink. He didn’t want to miss a second.

“I’ve known this for a while now, and I’m sorry for dropping the news on you like that. I couldn’t have told you, you would’ve never agreed to go.” Stephen stared at his hands absently. Seconds ticked by, masked by silence. Tony traced the outline of Stephen’s face. He would be content with this, if the purpose behind the recording was to spend some final moments together.

“You know, I’ve wondered what my other self saw, in the timeline you came from.” Tony jumped at the question. Even in a video Stephen knew how to catch him off guard. “They had been facing the same threat with less at their disposal. He hadn’t known you then. Why did he risk everything on a man with no knowledge of the future? As it turned out, time taught me the answer.” Stephen looked up at the camera. His eyes seemed to gaze into Tony’s soul. It was too much, but Tony couldn’t tear his eyes from the screen.

“You might not be a god. You might not be able to summon lightning, or do magic, or be nigh indestructible, but you are so, so strong. You’ve been dealt a bad hand, but you never gave up. You have the intellect to see what must be done, but more importantly, you have the heart to see it through. That is why out of all of us, you are the indispensable key to our salvation.” The words hammered into Tony’s heart. How could he say that? How could he be so sure? What was he seeing that Tony wasn’t?

“If you feel bad about this, don’t. Part of the journey is the end.” Stephen’s eyes reddened. He framed the footage with his hands as if he was cupping Tony’s face. “Whatever happens, I want you to know I have no regrets. I wouldn’t have had this any other way. The years we spent together were the best of my life. I just…wish we had more time.” Stephen ended the clip the same way it began. Tony lingered on the upturned corners of his face. Stephen leaned forward, his hand reaching beyond the camera. The screen went black.

Tony couldn’t help himself. He turned. On the crumpled bedsheets, not another soul was present.
None of them had made the bed that morning. The normally fluffed pillow on Stephen’s side of the bed was dented. A corner of the covers folded onto itself. He was here. This was where he’d been the morning they left. How could Tony have left him behind?

Tony buried his face into Stephen’s pillow. It smelt like the man he so desperately missed. *I’ll stay by your side. Until the very end.* Stephen had promised that Tony wouldn’t have to do this alone.

“You lied,” Tony whispered. “How could you lie?”

There was a time when a man would walk up to him and comfort him. Now there was nothing. The nightstand on the other side would never light up again. Tony clung to the pillow, torn between wanting to pull it closer and wanting to preserve the memory. But nothing lasted forever. No matter how hard he tried, in time, Stephen’s scent would fade, and the sliver of comfort Tony clenched onto so tightly would become just another pillow. Dust would settle on Stephen’s books. His favourite foods would expire. Tony could clean his belongs, restock the pantry but it wouldn’t be the same. Time would chisel away the remnants of Stephen piece by piece, until one day, the smile in Tony’s mind faded too.

The thought of staying here and allowing the memories to swallow him whole was tempting, so, so, tempting. But Tony couldn’t afford that. If he snapped then everything he’d sacrificed would be for nothing. Stephen would have given his life up for nothing. Tony couldn’t insult his partner like that.

Tony placed one arm beneath himself, and then the other. With all his might, he pushed himself upright. He’d risen from the darkness of captivity; risen from the snow of Siberia. He could rise from the ash and blood of his loved ones too. He’d told Pepper that he shouldn’t be alive unless it was for a reason. He became Iron Man in search of purpose. Now he’s finally found it.

He couldn’t snap, not yet.

Iron Man had one last job to do.

Chapter End Notes

*The author has packed her bags and fled.*

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sleep was bound to escape him, so Tony asked Mantis to knock him out. When he woke, semiconsciousness swathed him in a blissful veil of ignorance. For a moment, everything seemed fine. His aching muscles leached the energy from his limbs, and he floated on a cloud of nothingness. Then the events of the past day flooded his senses. Tony climbed out of bed, numb save for a single place in his heart.

Vengeance…it sure cleared the mind.

Tony set to work. He had done this once, six years prior, but despite the gap, it came back to him readily. He documented the events faced by each sub-group of his team then strung them together in chronological order. His memory was fuzzy in bits, but overall, the timeline was clear with minimal gaps.

“Sir, Mr. Parker wishes to speak with you,” Jarvis said. So they chose Peter to open the floodgates. It was a wise choice. Out of all of them, Peter was the one he was most likely to talk to. From their perspective, he must’ve gone mad. The Tony they knew would never ki—sacrifice his partner at the first opportunity.

“Make them wait,” Tony said. “Get Dum-E to deliver B.A.R.F.” Tony didn’t trust himself to relay the information correctly. It was best if his team saw the unfiltered truth. It pained Tony to expose himself like this, to lay all his poor judgements bare. But in the face of battle, his preferences meant nothing.

The doors opened, followed by the sound of wheels roving across the carpet. The gears in Dum-E’s arm whirled as the bot lifted the B.A.R.F. briefcase into view. Tony reached out to accept it. He froze at the sight of red. Behind Dum-E, the Cloak of Levitation hovered lower than usual. Its checkered lining scraped the ground, coating the bottom edges with dust. Its once upturned collars lay flat against the shoulder pads. This was the first Tony had seen of the relic since its swift exit on the cliff.

“You miss him,” Tony said. The cloak nodded. “Come here.” Tony held up his arms, and the cloak flew into them. The pair stayed there like they had thousands of times before, only minus the man in between. A dull ache dampened the rage in Tony’s heart. He pushed the cloak away. He needed to keep it together, more than ever now.

The cloak hovered beside him as Tony donned the B.A.R.F. glasses. He stuck a sensor pad on each temple, then two on his forehead. Tony’s fingers danced across the keyboard. The glasses activated, connecting with his hippocampus. He extracted his memories of the next four days, ending with the moment Stephen fell from the cliff. The programming converted the memories into short clips. Tony didn’t bother to render the output. He sent the clips in their raw form, all wireframe models and blue hues.
At the bottom right corner of the screen, a digital clock ticked away. It performed its duty with diligence. Time didn’t slow for any of them. Tony stared at the blinking colon in between the numbers, just like he had when he opened his eyes again after Siberia. Back then, he had been so grateful. But if a second chance at life was a blessing, a third chance was a curse.

All fate did was take, and take, and take. It would bait him with false hope, watch him climb high into the clouds then loosen the rocks from under his feet. Tony had picked himself up before, glued the shattered pieces back together, but he was never quite the same. Some fragments refused to align, and some cracks were too great to mend. He’d thought there was more to it. There must be a message hidden behind everything he’d endured, the why to his pain. Tony got it now. There was nothing behind his suffering. There was no glory, no salvation, no redemption. There was no higher meaning. People hurt him because they could, and he suffered because he was too weak to fight it.

No more.

Tony gave his team an hour to digest the information, when he stepped out of the elevator, the living space was silent as a grave. He’d thought there was no one there, except the entire team was present. The ones gone to Wakanda had returned. Peter, Bruce, Rhodey, Sam, Steve, Bucky, Clint, Natasha, Quill, Gamora, Drax, Mantis, Wong… Everyone who could be was there.

Steve stood at the sight of him. “Tony, I’m so sor—”

“Save it.” Tony surveyed the room’s occupants. In the first invasion, he had been standing here, at the same place, with the same people. His team had grown, but his team had also waned. “We all know what’s coming. And we’ve all seen what he can do.” Quill snuck a glance at Gamora, who held his gaze and nodded. Steve shifted closer to Bucky. Tony did his best to ignore the bubbling mess in his heart. Wasn’t this what he and Stephen both wanted? Them to suffer, so the others could be spared.

“We won’t let him. Not this time.” Tony clenched his fists. His nails dug into his palm, breaking the skin there. “We slay the bastards as they come. There will be no mercy.” The fire in Tony’s chest flared. It licked against his ribcage, drying him from the inside out. Up until this point, nothing had been personal. Thanos had sought to eliminate half the universe. The Avengers had sought to stop him. But how could it be anything but personal? Thanos had killed the one person he held most dear. The Soul Stone radiated heat against his fingertips. It was not a part of the mortal realm, but it answered his call. He was going to make them pay for it. He was going to do that if it was the last thing he ever did.

“We gather the stones,” Tony spat. “We kill Thanos.”

By now, Tony would think he was used to loss. He’d lost his parents, lost the battle, lost Stephen… What more could he lose? He struggled to come up with an answer. And if a man had nothing to lose then he had nothing to fear. The Soul Stone became one with his essence. He
needed but a thought, and the stone would morph into existence in his grasp. It filled him with power, opened his eyes to the astral plane. Tony loathed it. Every soul on display was a reminder of the sacrifice he had made. The ache in his chest would intensify, and the Soul Stone, convinced that he understood its significance, would grant him greater power.

It was a vicious cycle, a cycle Tony could not break. In a foolish attempt, he demanded the stone to return Stephen to him. The stone didn’t budge. Stephen was the stone’s sacrifice, and he was the stone’s to keep. He had been sealed away in a section of the astral plane even Tony could not access. Nothing was going to change that. Not when Tony relinquished control of its powers, and not when he gathered the Infinity Stones and became master of the universe. Tony withdrew from the world and mourned in silence. This was the path he chose, and he must see it through.

The Black Order arrived on the 4th of April like clockwork. Tony waited in the streets of New York with Peter and Bruce. He watched Ebony Maw and Cull Obsidian descend from the Q-ship. Ebony Maw took the lead. The bony creature possessed power disproportionate to his mass. Tony smirked. Didn’t they all?

“Hear me and rejoice,” Ebony Maw drawled. He splayed out his arms in ceremony. “You are about to die at the hands of the Children of Thanos. Be thankful, that your meaningless lives will now contribute to a greater cause. You have the privilege of being saved by the great Titan. The universal scales will tip toward balance because of your sacrifice. Even in death, you will become Children of Thanos.” Ebony Maw took in the empty streets. Across the wreckage, his beady eyes found Tony’s. He knotted his brows at Tony’s lack of enthusiasm. “What says you, stone keeper?”

Tony slowly closed his helmet. “I was thinking; I’ve just become a part of the family, right?” Tony gestured to his teammates. “That makes for five of us, and if half has to go… Odd numbers don’t divide, but for the sake of balance, I say we kill you both, then figure the rest out among ourselves.”

The nanoparticles on Tony’s right arm dripped down his hand, forming an elongated blade. He charged for Ebony Maw, signalling the start of the battle. The Hulk engaged with Cull Obsidian, but instead of pummelling his opponent through the streets like last time, his instructions today had been to stall. Contrary to popular belief, the Hulk was capable of finesse to some degree. His ginormous green fist connected with Cull Obsidian’s jaw. The monster flew through an office building. The Hulk followed in pursuit, distancing them from Ebony Maw, but containing the fight within a mile radius.

With one enemy out of the equation, Tony and Peter could concentrate on his trickier counterpart. Peter activated stealth mode. The flashing dot on Tony’s HUD followed Peter’s movement. The young Avenger was halfway to their arranged location. Tony soared across the street, dodging the debris Ebony Maw sent his way. Over the past two days, he had watched the B.A.R.F. footage of their first encounter two dozen times. He pulled his enemies apart and studied the pieces, searching for a way to end the battle as soon as it began. Work had been a vital crutch, without it, Tony didn’t know how he could’ve passed the hours. He poured everything he had into analysing those footages, and his concentration was rewarded with results.

After Tony got the hang of it, it was deadly simple. Telekinesis functioned like invisible hands. It shaped matter, propelled objects. Ebony Maw’s attacks were fluid and ever changing, but one thing remained constant: his ability to focus. Telekinesis required immense concentration. Even a skilled user like Ebony Maw could only execute a maximum of two movements at once. For him to add a third, he must halt one of the previous.

Combined with fight pattern analysis, Tony evaded the projectiles with ease. Ebony Maw couldn’t
harm him, but neither could he advance. Tony took a deep breath. He called forth the power that was a hair’s breadth away. Time slowed to a standstill. His body was suspended in space, but his soul phased through the barrier that separated the corporal and metaphysical.

Tony didn’t know what Thanos had seen when he wielded the Soul Stone, but in Tony’s eyes, Ebony Maw’s essence shone bright in the pale orange landscape. A knowing feeling overwhelmed his senses. It was as if he’d known Ebony Maw since the creature’s birth. In the fraction of a moment too short to be measured by a unit of time, Tony understood his habits, his ambitions, and his way of thought.

Tony returned to his body. The stone in his grasp dispersed. The process had been too quick for Ebony Maw to glimpse. If things could be any other way, Tony would tell him that his efforts were futile. The stone would never reveal itself to him, let alone heed his command. Infinity Stones fed off emotions. Anger, greed, desire… For the Soul Stone, it was pain. If Tony were to relinquish control, the Soul Stone would return to Vormir and await the next sacrifice. In the eyes of the stone, all souls were equal. Highborn or peasant, Celestial or mortal, for the stone to deem one worthy, one must offer a sacrifice.

But things could be no other way. They owed Tony more than they could ever repay. Tony flew high into the air then dove for his foe. He knew where and how Ebony Maw would strike. A well-placed cannon blast sent the alien soaring into a lamp post. Ebony Maw stabled himself with telekinesis, only to be confronted by Tony’s blade. He pushed Tony away with his free hand.

Behind him, a stealthy spider left his hideout. Peter shot a web grenade at Ebony Maw’s feet, sticking him in place. The alien tore the webs apart, but Peter was on to him. The legs of the Iron Spider swatted him aside, disrupting his hold on Tony. Tony’s calf muscles contracted. He landed on his feet, and with a single lunge, his blade sank into the alien’s heart.

“Im…posible…” Ebony Maw rasped. Tony retracted his blade. Warm dots splattered onto his helmet. He watched his foe clasp the hole on his chest. Blue blood seeped from between Ebony Maw’s fingers, wetting his robes. He collapsed onto the asphalt, his eyes wide open.

Cull Obsidian went down much quicker. All it took was for the Hulk to pin him down while Tony sandwiched a missile between his scales and his armour. The missile took out three quarters of his torso. For a confirmed kill, it took them a while to find the severed head.

Tony brought up his file of the Black Order, updated in real time. Of the four photos, three had been crossed off. Proxima Midnight was the last one standing. He switched to Bucky’s feed. It was smeared with blue. “Barnes, how’s your end?” Tony asked. He’d sent the remainder of his team to Shanghai, including the Guardians. It was probably an overkill, but Tony didn’t want to risk it.

“Could be worse,” Bucky said. The remaining photo was crossed off as they spoke. A finger scraped some of the blue off the camera, revealing a trashed market place. The scene was jam-packed with reinforcement. Tony breathed a sigh of relief.

“He’s coming,” Gamora said. As bait, it had been vital that she left the barrier, but stayed close to her crew. The group looked to the sky. Through Bucky’s lens, Tony saw a second ship fly toward the surface.

The sorcerers of Kamar Taj parted from the crowd. Wong was flanked by Minoru and Sol Rama. With Stephen gone, the librarian had been forced to take up his mantle. Wong lowered his centre of gravity, then crossed his hands before his chest. When they parted, the Eye of Agamotto blinked open. The glow of the iris coloured the world beyond the camera green. Tony looked away. The sight of the relic around someone else’s neck drove another spike into his heart.
“Steady…” Rhodey murmured. Tony forced himself to look back. A green wave washed over the market, followed by another, until a steady pulse vibrated the foundations they stood on. Minoru and Sol Rama joined the spell, their arms interlocking with Wong’s. Stephen had been the strongest sorcerer since his late teacher. Where the current spell casters lacked in power, they made up for in numbers.

The ship halted mid-air. It realised it’d flown into a trap the same moment green light collided with its windscreen. Tony could see him, through the astral plane where distance meant nothing. The Mad Titan raised his arm, but where the green light illuminated, time rewound. It wouldn’t be enough to simply hold him in stasis. Thanos could reshape reality in any way he fancied. Rewinding time wouldn’t trap him forever either. Sooner or later, he’d realise there was something off with his environment, but it’d take much longer when his consciousness was being subverted.

Tony glanced at the trio of sorcerers again. They had been assigned a gruelling task, but they must nullify Thanos until the final piece of the puzzle arrived.

Earth had four stones. Now all they needed was a vessel.
I’m sorry, Anthony.” That was all Loki said when he learned of what happened. Tony didn’t need anyone’s sympathy, but he accepted Loki’s apology with a curt nod. Stephen had been one of the few people Loki confided in. At least his regret meant something.

The raven-haired prince extended the miniaturised gauntlet. He faced the opening toward Tony, same as last time. Tony slid his left hand inside without hesitation. Was it the remaining heat of the forge that burned against his palm? Loki had merged the Space Stone before he returned. The blue jewel observed its new wielder with a distant air. It would heed Tony’s command, but unlike the Soul Stone, it held none as its master. The stone was as autonomous as the vast void it embodied.

Steve walked up to them, an unlocked box in his hand. The freshly severed Mind Stone radiated a mesmerising glow. Tony plucked the stone from the felt lining. It flew toward the largest of the empty sockets, clicking in place despite its jagged edges. A ripple of energy activated the dormant region of Tony’s mind. He thought faster, clearer, but with power came temptations. This time, it was much easier to tune out the whispers, for the one thing Tony truly wanted, the Mind Stone could not provide.

Tony shifted his attention to the slot above the Mind Stone. An orange gem materialised into existence, gradual and subtle, like it had always been there. The Soul Stone increased in vibrancy until its shine clashed with the other stones, but if one was to look closer, the contrasting colours complemented each other. Together, they formed a circuit, creating the beginning of a feedback loop that amplified their combined might. Half of the six nodes were missing, shattering the chain, but if one was to collect them all…

Infinite power awaited.

Tony stepped out onto the streets. The once bustling city was as quiet as a ghost town. Before him, three sorcerers faced each other in a perfect triangle. Their faces were damp with sweat. Sol Rama had sunk to one knee. It was only a matter of time before he succumbed.

Time. The last piece of the puzzle.

At the sight of Tony, Wong let out a long and shaky breath. Sol Rama was the first to exit the spell, followed by Minoru. Wong closed the Eye of Agamotto, then handed the artefact to Tony. The sorcerers retreated into the temporary hideout had Tony vacated. They’d be out for the rest of the battle.

Tony closed his fist. Blue light collided with the Eye, and a green gem left its vessel. Tony dropped the empty shell of the artefact onto the street. The Time Stone took up the socket on his thumb. The feedback loop to infinite power strengthened, but Tony was not eager to test its limit. The ship in the dark sky descended until it was a mile from the surface. A beam of light struck the streets,
carrying a Titan within it.

Thanos regarded the four shining stones with a pinched expression. “I take it my children are
dead.” Tony didn’t answer. Thanos took his silence as confirmation. “This day extracts a heavy

Tony kept his eyes trained on his enemy and marched forward. Thanos began marching too. The
miniaturised gauntlet connected seamlessly with Mark Sixty. Tony heard the footsteps of his team
behind him. Many of them sought vengeance too, but Tony had made up his mind. He closed his
fist, tearing open the fabric of space. The opening swallowed him and Thanos. They would not
fight on Earth, where the battle could destroy the world he had given everything to protect. Nor
would they fight with his teammates, where Thanos could use their loved ones as leverage. They
were going to do this alone, on a desolate wasteland, the way it was meant to be.

The Soul Stone lay bare Thanos’ past and present. Tony could see it, a place with advanced
technology, lush landscapes and content smiles. The place Thanos longed for, now nothing but ash
and dust. Tony took them there. This was where the Mad Titan’s journey began, and this was where
it would end.

Thanos looked around them. A perpetual dust storm coloured the ruins of his homeland orange.
Pieces of debris hovered freely. With even gravity affected, the planet had been damaged beyond
repair. The Titan activated his gauntlet, and a red wave of particles returned the ruins to its
prosperous beginnings. It had once been so beautiful. Any planet capable of sustaining life was a
hidden jewel in the vast, frozen void. Titan had been home to a race with underlying problems, but
limitless potential. It reminded Tony of Earth.

“It was like most planets. Too many mouths, not enough to go around,” Thanos said. The
vision of beauty he showed was devoid of people. “When we faced extinction, I offered a
solution.”

“Genocide,” Tony murmured.

“But random, dispassionate, fair to rich and poor alike. They called me a madman. And what I
predicted came to pass.” The vision faded, drying the lakes, decaying the city, and cracking fertile
soil. Thanos turned to Tony. “I’m a survivor, Stark, so are you. The hardest choices require the
strongest wills.”

Tony breathed in the orange-tinted atmosphere. His left arm was numb. Without Jarvis, without the
commlink, and without the constant inflow of statistics, the world inside the helmet was quiet. It
was pleasant and strangely peaceful. Despite being ten feet away from the biggest threat he had
ever faced, Tony was relaxed. He felt at ease in a way only a man who was sure of his purpose
could feel.

“I don’t care. You killed my family.”

Thanos didn’t apologise, nor did he ask who Tony’s family was. He’d slain hundreds of thousands
in the name of balance. What was one more? Thanos smirked, shaking his head. “We are more
alike than you know. So what’s to become of us? We battle to the death, each fulfilling our own
destiny?”

“You flatter yourself.” Tony’s eyes had long dried. His body was so tightly wound, his bones
ached. “You’re nobody’s destiny. You’re a means to an end.”

Tony lunged for Thanos. He swung the gauntlet in a wide arc, activating the Space Stone. A blue
blade of light slashed his foe in half. The halves did not bleed, instead disintegrated into red particles. Tony whipped around. His fist connected with Thanos’ jaw. The colossal Titan smashed through a floating fragment of debris, then rolled to a stop. He propped himself up with his elbow and raised his bare hand to his face. When he pulled away, his fingers were wet with blood. Thanos stared at his stained fingertips with wide eyes.

*So you bleed too.*

Tony didn’t give Thanos time to get back on his feet. He began another series of punches, each more brutal than the last. Thanos countered the strikes with illusions. His true form blurred into a cloud of vapour then morphed out of reach. Tony searched the jagged ruins. Powered by the wielder’s mastery of souls, the Mind Stone granted him telepathy and otherworldly intelligence. Reality and Power shielded Thanos’ mind, but they were no match against a line-up twice their size.

Tony’s corporal form was twenty feet from where Thanos would land. He activated the Space Stone. In the short span of the time it took Thanos to rematerialize, Tony was across the field. He aimed for Thanos’ face again. The Titan yanked his head out of the path of Tony’s fist, but he wasn’t quite quick enough. The ridges on Mark Sixty grazed the left side of his head, leaving a purple smear that ran from his cheekbone to his ear. It damaged his hearing, threw off his balance. Tony bombarded his blindside with punches.

Close quarter combat was tricky. The short distance meant limited response time, but with decades of Avenger’s training under his belt, Tony could do this with his eyes closed.

Thanos endured the brunt of it. He took up a defensive position then swung at Tony with the Power Stone. Mind and Soul alerted Tony at the same time, their warnings a symphony of echoes. Tony ripped apart the fabric of space, teleporting a full thirty degrees out of the direction of Thanos’ blow. He had been right to stay cautious. The Power Stone shattered the ground before Thanos in a wide cone shape, the edge of the cone grazing Tony’s suit.

Tony had taken a gamble when he chose to stay in range. It paid off. Thanos’ swing had left his midsection exposed. Tony didn’t waste the precious opportunity. He brought his right leg up and jammed his knee into the soft tissue beneath Thanos’ ribs. Space dissolved his armour. Tony’s knee connected with flesh. He watched with cold eyes as Thanos let out an agonised cry.

*So you scream too.*

The mighty Titan jerked around. He swung left and right, trying to nail Tony with the gauntlet. His attacks became increasingly messy. Tony tuned out the flying debris and listened to the whispers. Up. Right. Left. Back away. Despite being within three feet of a giant, he avoided every single punch. The repulsors on Tony’s legs transformed into a pair of jackhammers. He thrusted into the air then drove his feet into Thanos’ shoulder, feeling bones quake beneath toughened flesh.

The mighty Titan sank to one knee. Tony landed in front of him. Thanos took in the miniaturised gauntlet that was in his line of sight. It shone with four mesmerising colours. “Cosmic Entities forged the Infinity Stones. None had come close to gathering them since,” Thanos rasped. “No mortal is meant to wield such power.”

Silver nanoparticles flowed down Tony’s right arm. It coated his fist, then dripped downward to form a blade of common steel. Under normal circumstances, it’d never scratch Titan skin. Tony closed the gauntlet. The blade was coated with a blue, icy sheen.

The Titan knelt before him, but his back was straight. Tony looked into Thanos’ eyes and saw not
defeat, but acknowledgement. Tony brought the blade up. The silver tip shone under the sun of a planet long dead. He brought it back down. The tip pierced the chest plate, travelled beyond flesh then re-emerged the other side. Thanos let out a soft gasp. Tony wrenched the blade up, slicing the Titan’s heart in half.

Hot purple splatters moistened the cracked soil. Tony freed his blade. Thanos collapsed. The Titan landed on his back and gazed at the sky with empty eyes, one with his homeland at last. Tony breathed in short, rapid bursts. He took a wobbly step to the side. The adrenalin rush had burned all the oxygen in his blood. He felt top heavy, like his head was stuck in an airless vacuum. He tripped on something and fell.

Tony’s world spiralled out of control. He spun down a slope, his helmet hitting rocks and jagged metal. The momentum slowed at the foot of the slope. Tony sprung to his feet. He whipped his head about, searching for the next enemy, the next threat. He saw nothing but the remnants of a desolated city. Light penetrated the thick atmosphere and bore down on his back. Tony searched, but in his heart, he knew his foe was gone.

He dropped to his knees after scouring the ruins. With nothing left to keep him upright, Tony toppled backward. He retracted his helmet and laid his head still on the dirt. He watched the airborne particles drift by. It was over. This was it. The end of his journey. Tony could hear it so clearly, the string that had been holding him together snapped. He crumbled apart, laying in a broken heap, gazing at dust.

Tony didn’t know how long he had been there. Could’ve been days, could’ve been seconds. Water crept into Mark Sixty, soaking his undersuit. The chill threatened to pull him under. Tony ground his back molar together. With the last of his strength, he sat. Tony looked around at the landscape. It was familiar, surreal and orange. But unlike Titan, the planet that had been torn apart by war and poverty, the place Tony occupied was silent with the weight of death.

In the distance, a faint smidge of light beckoned. Backed by the ethereal glow that illuminated the landscape, the light was familiar, fluorescent. Tony trudged through the water, hobbling along until he saw the holograms, the glass facade, and the flashing machinery. A man stood in front of the workbench. Tony ran. He barged through the door to his lab and sprung for the man he’d left behind. Tony ran until he hit an invisible force. It held him in place, and he could not move another inch forward.

Tony screamed in the confined space. He thrashed against the force, bruising his arms and knees. He stilled after he used up all his strength. The man ten feet away hadn’t noticed the ruckus. He was dressed in comfortable, but presentable loungewear. A navy cardigan draped over his shoulders. His hair was neatly combed back, then locked in place with gel. Two silver streaks ran down his temple. He studied the hologram on the workbench, tilted his head to the side in thought. After tapping on the hologram with his knuckles, he reached for a cup of steaming tea then took a careful sip.

When Tony thought of home, an image would pop into his head. He looked on, too afraid to blink. But the thought of the tiniest possibility, that perhaps just for a second, they could be reunited filled him with courage. He parted his quivering lips. “Stephen…”

The man turned, taking Tony’s hopes and wrenching them apart. All too quickly Tony knew it couldn’t be him. Stephen would never look at him with such cold, distant eyes. He was supposed to smile. The corner of his eyes was supposed to wrinkle. He was supposed to beckon Tony over, then wrap his arms around him and ask about his day.

“Stephen.” Tony knew all that, but with the weight of those blue eyes on him, he could do nothing
but call the name again. The man set down his cup of tea. He walked up to Tony until they stood face to face.

“Did you do it?” he asked.

Tony blinked, disturbing the moisture that had welled up in his sockets. Tears flowed from the eyes that had once dried. Tony reached out for Stephen. His palm pressed against nothing but air. “It’s alright. The universe is safe. We can rest now.” The man didn’t acknowledge Tony’s answer, for that was not what he had asked. They stood there, in a plane that transcended space and time and other worldly forces.

“What did it cost?”

Tony had no response this time. What had it cost? It had cost one life, but it had also costed everything. Tony had saved his team by killing one of them. He had saved his home by tearing it apart. The man took a step forward, his eyes blue and calculating. They bore into Tony’s soul.

“Was it worth it?”

The answer sat on the tip of Tony’s tongue. He couldn’t say it.

Not now, not ever.

Chapter End Notes

Things are looking up. Right...?

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Beta'ed by:

Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was so quiet here.

Decade, century, millennia. They meant the same to a fallen city. It wore away gently, on a planet with a past and a present but no future. Blustery winds sent a blanket of clouds drifting over Tony. He laid in a serene stasis, with nothing to do, no threat over the horizon, waiting for nothing. There was a hollow cavity in his chest where his heart had been. Tony retracted Mark Sixty. His stiff back gave in to gravity, and his muscles sagged against a cast of soil. The Mind Stone whispered still. He tore off the gauntlet and flung it into the distance, rid of the wretched thing at last.

Tony let out a short, gentle sigh. He had been inside the suit since his battle with the Black Order. Without it, his body was feather light. It was as if he’d shed a steel cocoon. But this was not the crowning moment of metamorphosis, where he re-emerged after spending days inside a swath of his choosing. He hadn’t transformed into a beautiful butterfly. The cocoon had been spun too tight. It suffocated him, nearly choked him to death. And now that he was free, his limbs could no longer support his weight.

Tony lay there, feeling halfway between a man and a mutilated creature. His left arm ached. There was nothing for him now, not even a task to do. He should return to Earth with Thanos’ corpse, apologise to his teammates, then have a drink knowing the world was once again saved. Though sooner or later, his teammates would scatter like their ashes in the wind. They didn’t belong in the part of his life that he longed to fill. The one who did wasn’t coming back.

The thought of returning to an empty tower was too much. So Tony didn’t move. He wasted away on the ancient ruins, wondering what the city had once been called. A ribbon of debris meandered across his body, filling his lungs with dust. Tony coughed out the tiny particles. The sky above was dark, the variation subtle shades of grey. Then through the rolling clouds, Tony spotted a sliver of blue. It was quickly masked by another cloud, then emerged again after the cloud had wandered on. It was as if the sky was blinking at him.

Tony stared, hypnotised by the lively colour. This time nothing else came between him and the patch of blue. Through the narrow opening, a crepuscular ray of light illuminated the ruins. The light warmed Tony’s cheeks. He brought up his left hand to shield his eyes, and for a split second, the light caught the ring at just the right angle. The stone on the band sparkled.

Tony shot up, so quickly that his head spun. Through the nausea, he took the ring off and studied it, flipping it over back and forth. The stone didn’t give off another sparkle. Tony cursed himself for being so naïve. Of course it didn’t. Stephen was dead. His shining star had become just another rock.

Tony slipped the band back on. False hope or no, the shot of excitement had left some residual energy. He should go back, but going back was the last thing on his mind. The moment of
tranquillity passed. Thoughts once again filled his mind. Jarring voices screamed at each other, and when they stopped there was nothing left to mask the whispers. Tony cupped his ringed hand with his right and brought them up to his lips. He had to fight it. He had to hold himself together.

But for what? The threat was gone. He had completed his mission. He was standing at the end of the road, and before him, a cliff. Either way he faced annihilation. Was it so bad to crumble apart?

Tony tightened his hold. The metal dug into his finger. Stephen’s was among the voices that whispered. Tony tried to untangle him from the others. He was saying something. What was it?

Tony recalled the last time he had seen him, in a brief clip closer to a will than a conversation. You might not be a god, the man said. You might not be able to summon lightning, or do magic, or be nigh indestructible, but you are so, so strong. You’ve been dealt a bad hand, but you never gave up.

You’ve been dealt a bad hand, but you never gave up.

You never gave up.

Tony clenched his jaw. He tasted copper. How very much like Stephen to give him a kick in the ass even as a delusional whisper. What the hell was he doing? Hadn’t he made a promise? He’d find him. He’d keep looking until he did. That push on Vormir wasn’t goodbye.

With a grunt, Tony hauled himself up. He wanted to topple over, but instead of succumbing to gravity, he clenched his teeth tighter and stayed upright. Eventually his world stopped spinning. Tony called for the Soul Stone. The wretched thing called back. Tony hobbled along the ruins, finding the gauntlet that was lodged between a beam and a fallen wall. Tony yanked it out. He climbed up the slope. His knees dug into the remnants of crumbled buildings. The Titan lay where he had left him. Tony wedged his fingers between the gauntlet and Thanos’ forearm, pushing against the tough skin to make space. His left arm was weak, so he pulled with his right. The gauntlet slid down inch by inch, until finally, it slipped free of the stiffened hand. Tony fell back on the dirt, two Infinity Gauntlets resting on his chest.

The Soul Stone granted him access to the astral plane. The Soul Stone had also sealed away Stephen’s soul. There was no way to cheat the stone on the subject it governed, but perhaps there was a way around it. Time was a linear line. Tony could travel back to when Stephen was still alive, but Thanos wouldn’t be defeated, and the remaining Infinity Stones would disperse to their locations at the time. Tony panted. He had to think logically. That was what he did best, wasn’t it? Thinking. He recalled what little information he had on alternate realities. It could be summarised by a single conversation. He’d sat in a shaded room behind half-opened shutters, gazing beyond the steam of a cup of camomile tea.

The Multiverse comprises of alternate universes which share a universal hierarchy, but it is a mere subsection of the larger Omniverse, the collection of all alternate realities. Many of the universes in a Multiverse are born through divergence, where a world-shaping event with different potential outcomes gives rise to parallel timelines. One cannot travel across the Multiverse by leaving one reality then entering another, one can only give birth to more outcomes, more possibilities. There are an infinite number of outcomes.

Twice he’d gone back. Twice he’d birthed alternative timelines inside his own Multiverse, different branches, but belonging to the same tree. Inside the confines of the Multiverse, The Ancient One had said it was impossible to leave one reality then enter another, because each time the universe rewound, another branch would appear. It wasn’t a new universe; it was a new possibility within the same. But outside the tree Tony resided, was a whole forest.
The Soul Stone wouldn’t return Stephen, the Stephen that belonged to his reality. However, somewhere in the forest, there was bound to be trees near identical to his own. Trees that were so similar, a yellowing leaf was all that differed. What if Tony went to that reality? Commanded the Soul Stone to retrieve that Stephen? Would the man he sought be a different person, or the same, only he’d had tuna for lunch instead of salmon?

Would the Soul Stone even agree? Could his version of the stone access the astral plane of another world? There were a billion and one unanswered questions. Was the ray of hope, magnificent but beyond his grasp, worth the leap? Jumping inside the Multiverse was rare. Jumping outside the Multiverse was unheard of. He could be lost between the cracks of worlds forever.

Tony looked up at the sky. The opening had closed, as if it’d never been there, but Tony had seen it. It existed. He had thought with his brain all his life. That brought him to the end of the road, but no further. Perhaps it was high time he followed his heart. He would have to break the barrier of the Multiverse then enter anew. It was beyond dangerous, but Tony was a time travel veteran in a way no other creature was. Tony faced the opening of the gauntlet toward himself and confronted the void. He slid his left hand inside, activating the Space Stone. The Titan’s gauntlet fell to the ground empty. Power and Reality flew toward the remaining slots. They clicked in place with a subtle, but unmistakable clink.

His mastery of souls enabled him to transcend the barrier between mind and body. His strengthened mind granted him insurmountable force. The force fed the Space Stone, allowing teleportation through matter. Omnipresence fuelled his ability to rewind the natural order. With the fabric of space and time fluid, the Reality Stone granted him access to the Multiverse.

The feedback loop was complete. Infinite power coursed through his body, bursting his blood vessels. The diluted super soldier formula could barely keep up. Tony could see every being, every crevice, in every timeline. There were no limitations. He was one with the universe, and if he so desired, above the universe. Tony looked back. He peered through the distance that separated him and his home. On Earth, his teammates anxiously awaited his return. Now he would never return. Or perhaps another Tony so similar, they might as well be the same would take his place.

He was selfish, for wanting this. Was his world at peace not enough? What if his home world still needed Iron Man? But he had battled for so long, fought so hard, won so many wars. He had given decades of his life to the cause. He was old and tired.

He deserved this. He deserved his one act of selfishness.

Tony looked ahead. If he looked hard enough, he could see the edge of the universe, where the void stretched so far it looped back onto itself. That connecting seam between the end and the beginning.

He kept his eyes on his destination and closed his fist.

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Tony woke in a sea of nothingness. White fog had swallowed him whole. The vapour surrounded
him and stretched endlessly in every direction. Tony climbed to his feet. It was as if he was floating, but the fog beneath his boots didn’t give. Tony stared at those boots. They were made from black leather, steel-capped. He was wearing a black tank top, with black trousers. Workshop attire. There was no gauntlet on his left hand, no arc reactor in his chest. He wandered through the mist, his heart sinking with every step.

Where was he? Or more importantly, what was he? The arc reactor had been a part of him since his earliest Avenging days. It was what made Iron Man. He’d torn open, then escaped the vessel that contained his universe, but in the process of doing so, perhaps he’d left behind more than he bargained for.

Tony searched through the fog. Without the gauntlet, he couldn’t move on. He needed to find that near identical world. His movement disturbed the stillness. Section by section, the fog parted. Tony came to a staggering halt. Before him was a whirlpool, ginormous, and with movement inside. It depicted an epic battle. Cosmic entities flattened worlds in their conquest to master the universe. Then the scene transitioned into a mundane Manhattan evening.

There were hundreds of thousands of whirlpools around him, each depicting a scene equally epic or mundane. Tony was overwhelmed by the options, though the years had honed his skills at searching for the silver lining. Each whirlpool was a distinctive world. This must be the right place.

Having something to do was the next best thing to having hope, so Tony settled for the seemingly impossible task. This was harder than searching for a needle in a haystack. He was looking for a drop of water in the ocean. He studied the whirlpools near his feet. Beside the ginormous scene of Manhattan streets were a couple much smaller. They showed an alien race that Tony didn’t recognise. He kept his head down and walked. The whirlpools were not grouped by dimensions or species.

Tony dragged a hand down his face. It could take years to go through the section he could see alone, not to mention he had no means to record his findings. He was at a loss of what to do when a flash of yellow crossed his line of sight. Tony drew in a sharp breath. Had he gone mad? He considered it for a second, then took off after her. If he’d seen Stephen, he would’ve blamed it on his state of mind, but the figure hadn’t been dominating his thoughts. There was no way he’d hallucinate someone he’d only met once.

As Tony ran toward her. His boots grazed a dozen possible candidates. Tony forced himself to keep going. He came to a stop before a woman clad in golden sorcerer robes. Her hood obscured her eyes but exposed her colourless lips. “How is this possible?” Tony asked. “I was there when you died.”

The Ancient One did not acknowledge his question. She hovered there. It was then that Tony noticed her fraying edges. Half of her feet had disappeared. Her calves and forearms dissolved into the fog, like she was becoming one with the vapour. How long had she been here, fading away as she searched for a way out? Or perhaps she hadn’t been searching for a way out. She showed no excitement at the sight of him, only a tinge of gladness from her upturned lips.

“What are we?” Tony asked. “Come on, you’ve got to help me out.”

The pale lips parted. No sound came out. But Tony could hear those words, because he had heard them before, during their first and only conversation. Tony watched her lips move, and words floated into his mind as if she had muttered them beside his ear.

*I cannot see into your past, nor can I impact your future.*
Tony’s gaze snapped downward. Beneath her hovering feet, was a small whirlpool. Its outline was faint, like it hadn’t been fully realised, a bud seconds before bloom.

“Is this it?” Tony reached down and tried to part the fog that obscured the image. When he pushed the vapour away, more materialised to take its place. “Are you sure?” The woman only smiled at him. White fog eroded her robes. She crumbled into fine flakes as the fog swept her away.

She was gone, leaving behind more confusion than clues. Tony looked around him. Hundreds of thousands of worlds vied for attention with bright lights and clashing steel. Yet the one under his hands refused to unveil the tiniest corner. Could he risk it? She hadn’t asked where he wanted to go. What if she had confused him with someone else?

Tony wondered, and yet that knowing curve of her lips had said more than words ever could. She had waited for him, and years later, she found him. She showed him the path then faded away before his very eyes. Everything died, but everything had also once lived. His ending journey began with a single leap of faith.

Tony reached down. The whirlpool sucked him in. He fell, and then he was flying. Armour-less, Tony soared across the void. He pictured his destination. First mountains, then a fuchsia horizon. The muddled atmosphere cleared. His environment came to life. As he soared, the arc reactor returned to his chest. Black under suit encased his muscles. A ring materialised on his finger.

His feet came to connect with stone. Tony felt his lungs press against his ribcage as he heaved. He stood at the bottom of an altar, a blackened and smoking gauntlet on his hand. Mounted on the singed metal were six vibrant stones. The molten metal fused with his hand. White, searing pain shot up his burnt arm, but Tony was in no rush to treat it. In the horizon, the Milano entered FTL travel. It carried away another Tony Stark, who had just sacrificed another Stephen Strange.

The stone plane beneath him was cold and white like aged bones, and yet a puddle of liquid warmed it. The red fluid seeped into the cracks of the altar. Tony’s breath bottled up in his chest. He traced his sight to the origin of the liquid. It came from the back of a man’s head, the red wetting his hair. Tony ran to him. He skidded to a stop beside the man on the ground.

The gauntlet was destroyed, but Tony no longer needed a vessel. He beckoned the Soul Stone to return. The orange gem disappeared from the back of the blackened artefact. Return him to me. Tony commanded. Return this man’s soul. The stone glowed in the astral plane.

It listened.

Tony allowed himself to take a small breath. He deployed Mark Sixty, opening the medics latch on his forearm as the nanoparticles solidified. A vial of Extremis Super Serum lay in the tiny compartment. Tony retrieved it. His right hand shook so badly, the serum sloshed in the cylinder. Tony flipped Stephen to his side. The fall had crushed his head and broke many bones. With how much his hand was shaking, it took Tony a while to align the cylinder to Stephen’s neck. He activated the vial, and the serum pushed into Stephen’s bloodstream.

Fire ignited the dented wound. It rebuilt the crushed brain tissue, then moved onto mending broken bones. The limbs that had been bent on a wide angle snapped back in place. Tony watched the miracle unfold. When the fire died, the man on the ground was returned to normal. He looked so peaceful, he could be asleep.

A second passed, then two, then three. Nothing. Tony breathed in fast, shallow bursts. He gave
Stephen’s shoulder a gentle shake, like all those times he had woken him from slumber. Amidst the howling winds, Tony caught the remnants of a sigh. Long, curling lashes fluttered in the breeze. They opened slowly, revealing irises bluer than the patch of Titan sky.

“Tony?” Stephen asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

It was his name. He had heard it all his life. Such a mundane word shouldn’t affect him so greatly, and yet it did. Tony could no longer hold himself together. He buried his face in Stephen’s robes and cried.

Chapter End Notes

The beauty of Tony's character is that he never gives up. He alway, always finds a way.

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He and Stephen amputated his left arm in the lab he had used to create the new element. Everything below the elbow had died. The molten gauntlet had fused with the burnt tissue, and after Stephen returned them to Earth with the Space Stone, the arm was beyond salvage.

It was a clean cut, made just above the burn line. Tony hadn’t thought much of it. He had another functional arm to hold onto the man he’d lost and found. That was enough.

Tony barred Jarvis and Friday from relaying his existence to the other Tony Stark, then passed out for forty-seven hours. He dreamed of nothing. When he woke, he was sore from his scalp to his little toe. He tried to sit but couldn’t. It was as if his spine had been glued to the gurney. His head was groggy from the morphine, and his left arm reduced to a stump wrapped in white bandages. A ray of dappled sunlight filtered into the med bay. Beyond the window, branches of pared-back oak were sprouting spring shoots. It was a beautiful Manhattan day.

Tony craned his head to the side. He was alone in the room. A pang of panic struck him, and his call came out as a hoarse cry for help. Tony struggled to right himself as he heard wheels roll across polished concrete. A man burst into the room. His tea spilt over the edge of his mug, wetting his cuff. He came to a stop before Tony, then abandoned his mug at the foot of the gurney. He helped Tony sit.

“How are you feeling?” Stephen asked. Tony only looked at him. He parted his lips to make way for his response, but as it turned out, he had something else on his mind. Tony reached out with his intact hand. Blood and grime had sunk into the fine lines of his finger, and Titan soil burrowed under his nails. Tony’s hand stopped halfway across. It didn’t seem right, tainting Stephen with the residue of battle.

A hand caught his. Stephen held onto him with the strength Tony wished he’d had. He leaned forward, and warm lips pressed against his own. Stephen’s lashes brushed across his cheek. Tony gasped as something light and tender swelled in his chest. He breathed in the man’s scent. Shaking hands cupped the back of his neck and deepened the kiss. Tony pulled Stephen close. His muscles protested, and his spine hurt as if it was about to snap, but Tony had never felt more alive. They parted when they were both dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

Tony told Stephen everything. From being sent back in time, to sacrificing him, to ultimately winning the battle and leaving his universe then entering it again. Stephen listened, asked questions, and agreed with Tony that their teammates must not know. It would be another two days before the Tony Stark of this universe fought Thanos and left.

Stephen hesitated when they discussed Tony’s counterpart. At first, Tony hadn’t dwelled on it. For him, the war was over. Things were finally beginning to look up. But in the days that followed, he’d catch Stephen watching the tower’s surveillance footage. He’d do it when he thought Tony
wasn’t looking, but when Tony caught him, he’d make no attempt to hide. He hadn’t wanted to lie.

They shared more intimate moments since the revelation, but they were a brief press of the lips. The two of them remained hidden in the lab, sleeping on the same bed, their bodies ten inches apart, both longing for the other, but separated by an intangible barrier. It was then that Tony realised, to Stephen, he wasn’t ‘Tony’, but ‘Tony from the future’. The man Stephen fought and died for was drowning in a pool of depression, and Stephen could do nothing about it.

It made Tony wonder who he might’ve returned to. He was Stephen Strange, but was he the man Tony fell in love with? In theory, he should be a near copy, but the state of the world Tony had leapt into made him question that. The whirlpool had been a budding possibility. It bloomed into existence as he entered. Had he not only found, but created a copy of his world where everything was identical, except he popped into existence with a complete set of Infinity Stones? It was akin to creating another branch in the Multiverse, but on a macro level, where outcomes looped back onto themselves endlessly, like an ouroboros in an eternal cycle of renewal; creation from destruction, life from death.

In that sense, the Stephen by his side would be the same person as always, except earlier in the timeline. Tony couldn’t claim he knew the answer, neither could Stephen. The woman who could was lost to the vapour of time, leaving them to ponder the what-ifs.

The state of uncertainty founded the basis of Stephen’s confliction. He was better acquainted with the Multiverse than Tony. If Tony could come up with the concept, so could he, but a concept remained such until it was proven by evidence. For this world to be the correct outcome, Tony’s counterpart must eventually vacate it, leaving the universe with one set of Infinity Stones, Thanos defeated, and him as the only Tony Stark.

As Stephen observed Tony’s counterpart, Tony also observed Stephen. Had a copy of Stephen watched him with the same air of hopelessness as he struggled in the aftermath of Vormir? Had Stephen and a future version of himself hidden in the same lab? Perhaps they’d returned to the same city after Tony thought he’d lost his partner forever. There was no way for him to find out.

The Tony Stark of this world departed on the 5th of April 2018, not a day too soon. Tony and Stephen waited for twenty-four hours. He didn’t return, and if what happened to Tony was any indication, he never would. Tony Stark’s departure lifted a burden off Stephen’s back. Now they could go back to the way things were, except nothing remained the same.

Tony couldn’t sleep. His body was no longer on the verge of collapse, and with the excess energy came the nightmares. In those dreams, he’d chase after Stephen, only to push him to his death. They’d be back in the Soul Stone, a step apart but unaware of each other’s presence. Tony would close his fist, and nothing would happen. Or he’d be lost in the Crossroads, the nexus point connecting all worlds, searching endlessly, but never finding a way out.

Stephen battled his own demons. Dying wasn’t easy, Tony would know, and especially not when he was pushed to death by the person he loved. None of them was ready to face the outside world, to be bombarded by questions that deepened wounds still raw with blood.

At one point it became too much. Tony was overwhelmed with the need to flee. Forty-eight hours after Tony Stark’s departure, he slipped away as Stephen slept. Tony didn’t know where he wanted to go, or where he could go. They hadn’t revealed the outcome to their teammates. He stood, clad in Mark Sixty, in the threshold that connected the lab to the outside world. He was lost, so he did the same thing he’d done the last time he was lost. He closed his eyes and envisioned his destination. A place with crystal waves and a concrete garage came to mind. He flew to Malibu.
The mansion waited on the shoreline, chiselled into the rocky cliff face. His engineer had said it was impossible to build here, so Tony took on the project himself, spanning twice as wide and reaching twice as far into the sea. A dozen aged pine trees swayed in the salty breeze. Tony touched down on the helicopter pad, retracted Mark Sixty, then walked the rest of the way up.

Since Siberia, he’d never integrated the suit into the Malibu mansion. Stark Tower had been built too quickly, and the tower had been his home too long. He breathed in the scent of the ocean, crisp yet wet. Tony lingered under the palm trees until the stifling mass in his lungs dispersed.

The pristine architecture was surrounded by acres of lawn, like a gleaming jewel under the rising sun. It was a snapshot of his old life, a freeze-frame of simpler times. Tony pushed open the glass doors and strolled into his living room, smiling at the excessive modernist decor. Why had he thought putting boulders into his house was a good idea? The soles integrated into his under suit rubbed against polished marble. Tony strolled deeper into the mansion, passing empty rooms and empty corridors. He stopped in a second living area, the one he reserved for parties. A reconstructed fireplace lined the wall to his left. Tony pressed his back against the stone and slid down until he was sitting on the floor. He leaned against the bottom ledge of the fireplace, his hand resting on his bent knee. Before him was a curved glass wall, and beyond that, the ocean.

The body of water rippled like a plane of blue and silver glass. A cloudless sky blurred the horizon, where an orb of gold rose from the depth of the sea. A lone yacht rocked in the currents. It beat against the tides, destined for shore. The golden rays chased away the chills of night. Tony took in the circular walls, the framed dancefloor, the blackened party lights. That had been lifetimes ago, the party that began it all.

A faint hiss sounded further down the corridor. Tony didn’t call out, but the man found him, like he always did. Stephen slid onto the floor beside him, their knees just shy of touching. Side by side, they admired the magnificent view. Neither of them said anything until the sun hung high in the sky.

“I’m sorry for acting the way I did.” It was Stephen who broke the silence.

“You’re gonna have to be more specific,” Tony said. “You did a lot of things in the past week, and believe me, it’s been a long and shitty week.”

Stephen had the audacity to chuckle. “Alright, I suppose I deserve it. In order of my screw ups, I’m sorry for hiding things from you, I’m sorry for pushing you the way I did, and I’m sorry for acting like an asshole after I realised you came from another Multiverse.”

Tony looked away. “You had no choice.”

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t change what I did.” Stephen paused. The air grew heavy, and he ran a hand down his face. “Tony, I’m so sorry for everything. I tried to protect you, but all I ended up doing is hurt you.”

Tony sniffled. It must be the dust. He’d endured too much to cry in his mansion, with no threats, no war, and the love of his life by his side. “Apology accepted, but don’t think you’re off the hook. I expect compensation, a home-cooked meal and a massage to start off.”

The dust was affecting Stephen too. “Anything you want.”

Tony turned to him. The purplish shadow under Stephen’s eyes had begun to heal, but it’d be some time before his hollow cheeks filled again. Fine lines crowded his features. The light tan he got from the Great Barrier Reef had faded completely, leaving a pale and sickly complexion. The
tailored shirt hung loosely from his frame. Tony’s eyes moistened under the glare of the sun. “I want you to come over here.”

A shaking hand crossed the distance between them. Stephen placed his left hand on top of Tony’s right. The tip of his fingers were cool, the tremor forming a slight vibration, tentative, yet familiar. It was as if he was touching Tony for the first, or perhaps billionth time. Tony caught the hand and pulled Stephen in, shifting the man onto his lap. They sat face to face, until Stephen leaned in to rest his head on Tony’s shoulder. Tony tightened his lone arm. When that wasn’t enough, he raised the stub of his left and used them both to circle Stephen in, pressing their bodies together and closing the gap.

“I missed you.” Tony’s voice was muffled by Stephen’s grey ing locks. “I missed you so, so much.”

“I know.” Trembling fingers threaded through Tony’s hair. Stephen turned and kissed him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Tony asked when they parted.

“Tell you what?”

“The truth. What laid ahead.”

Stephen’s hand traced the furrow between his brows. “Tony, you were always too kind for your own good. If I’d given you the time to prepare, you would’ve never taken the final step. In the worlds where I told you the truth, you became so fixated with saving my life, that you lived the nightmare over and over, each time looking for another way to succeed, each time doing something different, and each time failing to stop Thanos. You spiralled into madness, until one day, my spell failed.”

Tony didn’t object, because that was exactly what he would’ve done. Had he been given the chance to think, he would’ve steeled his will, then sailed against the current and never looked back. The phantom ache of his severed hand reminded him how close things had been. So much could’ve gone wrong, it was a miracle they succeeded once. “Did you know I would come back for you?”

“I couldn’t see past my death, but I had to break you from that loop. You would’ve lived eternity in torment then snapped and withered away. You didn’t deserve that.”

“You gave your own life to save mine, but…wait.” Something clicked in Tony’s mind. “If you couldn’t see past your death, how would you know I was going to succeed?”

Stephen blinked once, twice, then averted Tony’s eyes. “You’d have the Soul Stone.”

“But how would you know?” Tony wasn’t about to let this go. He moved to the side to catch Stephen’s gaze. “Stephen Strange, did you just gamble your life on a mere possibility?”

“How about I throw in a month of chores with the meal and massage?”

Tony had never felt more like protecting someone and strangling them at the same time. This man would be the death of him. You’re going to change the universe, he said. You’re our only hope, he said. God dammit, Stephen Strange.

In the end, Tony settled with digging his chin into Stephen’s shoulder. Over the white shirt collar and the curved glass, more ships had set sail. The waters were calm. It would be a fine day at sea.

“Not a bad view to retire to,” Tony said. Stephen’s brows shot up. Perhaps it was unwise to set a precedent for selfishness. The words that’d lived in the depth of Tony’s head for years floated to
the surface. They found a way out of his mouth, and once he said them, he didn’t want to take them back. “This is it. I’m out. I can’t do this again.” Tony didn’t ask, but his question was clear.

Stephen followed his gaze and looked out to the ocean, taking in the reflected sun and varying blue hues. “I’ve always wanted a bungalow by the sea.”

“Well, sorry, but all you’re getting is this mansion.”

Stephen boomed with laughter. It was carefree and unapologetic. The contagious sound affected Tony too, and he held onto Stephen tighter while they sat on the floor of the mansion, shaking like madmen.

“Are you alright?” Stephen asked after they’d calmed.

“No, but I will be.” Tony tuned out the pain of his phantom hand. It was always easier with a certain someone by his side. Who was he, the man in his arms? Tony couldn’t answer that, but perhaps it no longer mattered. Was he the same person from before Siberia, or even the Battle of Wakanda? No. But was he still him?

Each time he shed the cocoon of his old world, he left something behind and discovered something new. The Stephen in his arms was a continuation of the Stephen of his memories, like two identical sheets of acetate, with prints that matched perfectly when stacked on top of each other. The only way to tell them apart was to inspect the scratches. In time they’d heal. Tony was sure of it. They had both fallen into cracks so dark, the common man could not imagine, but it wasn’t the way they broke that defined them, it was the way they rebuilt themselves, piece by piece, using the remains of who they once were.

It was alright. They would be alright.

Stephen looked at Tony and smiled with such fondness, it made Tony’s heart ache. Tony held onto him. With tenderness he’d learned to embrace and stubbornness he’d learned to appreciate. “No more surprises?” he asked the person he was content to spend the rest of his life with.

“No more surprises.”

Chapter End Notes

You guys know what’s next! ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Afternoon, May 29th, 2018 – The outskirts of Venice

Tony stood before the vanity, adorned by peonies in varying shades of blush. It was a warm spring day. Nearly two months after the media coined ‘Infinity War’, those who had been displaced by the damaged cities had been relocated to temporary housing. With reconstruction efforts well under way, the Avengers could at last afford to let loose their hair.

The man in the mirror sported an immaculate goatee, silver, with a sprinkling of chestnut. A head of frosted locks was combed back loosely, then frozen in place with spray. Wielding infinite power had drained the colour from those locks. He was on the lean side, clad in a white tuxedo finished with a black bowtie. On his left lapel rested a boutonnière of fir, juniper, and a peony seconds from bloom.

He looked dashing, if not a tad unfamiliar. Tony raised his left arm and flexed the chrome fingers. A hand of nanoparticles had replaced the one that’d served him for nearly fifty years. Extremis could regrow severed limbs, but Tony had chosen not to mend his arm. Time may not heal all wounds, but it did fog one’s memory. After everything that had happened, he didn’t want to forget. Though pragmatically he still needed both arms; tearing open packets with his teeth had gotten old quickly. That hadn’t been a challenge. Before Iron Man, Tony Stark was an engineer.

If Tony looked on the bright side, now that his left hand had vacated a spot, he finally had somewhere substantial to stash the nanoparticles. He’d built himself a new arm from the technology of Mark Sixty, then paraded around the tower, gathering Bucky and Nebula and declaring the impromptu founding of the One-Arm-Wonder Club. Though at this point, he might be the club’s only registered member.

It was ironic he’d become a literal Man of Iron on the verge of retirement, or maybe just Iron Lefthand Man. Tony supposed he could increase the density of the nanoparticles. If he could fit repulsor cannons, the propulsion system, hydraulics, and the power source all in a four-inch triangle with the corners shaved off, imagine what he could pack in now he had a whole arm.

Stop, Tony told himself before his brain flew back to his workshop. Today is your big day. Relax, old man.

There was a knock on the door, followed by the voice of his assistant. “Mr. Stark, the ceremony is about to begin.” Tony straightened his tuxedo jacket and gave his reflection one last glance.

Born ready, as he liked to say.

Tony emerged from the prep room. The halls were empty; the guests had converged elsewhere for the ceremony. He passed a foyer strewn with bouquets and left via the main entry, stopping in a
marble colonnade. A man stood under the frescoed ceiling. He wore a black tuxedo. Tony imagined the white bowtie and matching boutonnière before he turned. Reality filled out the blanks for him.

Stephen looked nervous, and despite his bravado, perhaps Tony’s face reflected his partner. They had no reason to be; they’d faced down kings and gods and monsters. Tony held out his hand, the flesh one. Stephen took it, and they walked down the steps together. They strolled through the garden, with its clipped rectangular hedges and jade lawn. Rows of grapevine lined the hills in the distance. They passed under an arched gateway and marched further from the villa until a chapel came into view. The quaint building sat among wild flowers. White walls glowed against the green of the landscape. Moss had begun to grow on the weathered terracotta roof. Tony and Stephen stopped before a set of heavy oak doors. They turned to each other, then both let out a long breath and smiled. Hand in hand, they entered the chapel.

The nave was packed with guests. They stood as he and Stephen entered. After the war, neither of them had wanted a large crowd, but with the Avengers, Asgardians, Guardians, Wakandans, sorcerers from Kamar Taj, and the attendee’s plus one, the guest list had been far from compact. He and Stephen walked down the aisle, passing the people they’d saved the world with. Light flooded the interior, from the black and white chequered tiles to the vaulted ceiling; the chapel was basked in an ethereal glow.

The front row had been reserved for the most significant people in their lives. Tony had insisted that just this once, Happy could join the ceremony as a guest instead of head of security. His staunch friend was also beginning to grey. Happy had reserved the left seat closest to the aisle. He was trying his best not to cry. He bit into his bottom lip and gave Tony a red-eyed thumbs up. Tony winked back. His oxfords clicked against the tiles. Soon, they were at the altar.

As Tony stood before the altar, his heart rate increased. The red beating organ thumped against the walls of his chest. He shifted his weight from the ball of one foot to another. The hand that was joined with his squeezed lightly. Tony glanced to the right. Stephen was looking straight ahead, but his thumb rubbed Tony’s hand in a gentle circle. Tony suppressed his urge to smile and looked straight ahead too.

“Welcome, family, friends, and loved ones,” the officiant began. “Today, we gather to celebrate the marriage of Anthony Stark and Stephen Strange. We come together not to mark the start of a relationship, but to acknowledge the strengthening of a pre-existing bond. Love is a gift, and it is one they have given each other every day for the past eight years. This day is made possible not only by their enduring love, but also by the grace and support of their family and friends. So welcome to one and all, who have travelled near and far. Tony and Stephen thank you for your presence, and now ask for your blessing of their union.” The officiant’s voice was soothing but strong. He dutifully cited the verses while glancing over each member of the audience.

As Tony stood before the altar, his heart rate increased. The red beating organ thumped against the walls of his chest. He shifted his weight from the ball of one foot to another. The hand that was joined with his squeezed lightly. Tony glanced to the right. Stephen was looking straight ahead, but his thumb rubbed Tony’s hand in a gentle circle. Tony suppressed his urge to smile and looked straight ahead too.

“Marriage is perhaps the greatest and most challenging adventure. No ceremony can create a
marriage. It can be wrought only from love and patience, from tenderness and laughter, from learning to forgive, learning to appreciate your differences, and learning to stand by each other through the ever-evolving tapestry of life. What this ceremony can do, is bear witness and affirm the choice you make to stand together as life mates and partners,” the officiant said. “In the spirit of life and adventure, Ms. Virginia Potts will now share a passage.”

To cohere with the theme of the wedding, Pepper wore a pale peach-coloured dress. The flowing fabric draped just shy of touching the floor. Her hair had been styled into a simple Gibson tuck. Pinned to the side of the bun was a blooming peony and dainty spring leaves. Her heels beat a buoyant rhythm as she made her way to the podium. Pepper adjusted the mic, then glanced over Tony and Stephen. “The following is an extract from *Oh, the Places You’ll Go*, penned by Dr. Seuss.” Her smile painted a ray of sunshine across her face. She parted her lips, and playful verses flowed from the speakers.

"Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!

“You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.

“You’ll look up and down streets. Look’em over with care. About some you will say, ‘I don’t choose to go there.’ With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you’re too smart to go down a not-so-good street.

"Oh! The Places You’ll Go!
You’ll be on your way up!
You’ll be seeing great sights!
You’ll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.

“You won’t lag behind, because you’ll have the speed. You’ll pass the whole gang and you’ll soon take the lead. Wherever you fly, you’ll be best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

"Except when you don’t.
Because, sometimes, you won’t.

"You’ll get mixed up, of course, as you already know. You’ll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go. So be sure when you step. Step with care and great tact and remember that Life’s a Great Balancing Act. Just never forget to be dexterous and deft. And never mix up your right foot with your left.

"And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed!
(98 and ¾ percent guaranteed.)

"Kid, you’ll move mountains!
So…be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray or Mordecai Ale Van Allen O’Shea, you’re off to Great Places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So… get on your way!”

Pepper’s smile remained as radiant as ever. Before infinite power and the Avengers and Afghanistan, there had been a woman that looked after Tony. She wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Tony, Stephen, I wish you both the best of luck. I’m so proud, and so happy for you both.” Tony bit into the tip of his tongue. It was too early for tears.

Now was not the time for lengthy prose, so Pepper left the podium and returned to her spot beside Rhodey. Tony was sure she had a killer of a speech lined up for dinner. The officiant observed the audience, then turned to Tony and Stephen. “Marriage is the beginning, or rather, the continuation of your lives together as a unified whole. Today signifies the creation of a new home. Love is rooted in faith, trust, and acceptance. May you be fulfilled by each other’s love and friendship. May you be overjoyed by the promises you are about to make, and the life together you will lead.”

They turned to face each other. There was a tingle in the tip of Tony’s fingers. His head was light and his body weightless. Tony looked into the blue of Stephen’s eyes. The colour had come to mean so much for him. Hope, faith, and most importantly, joy. Stephen’s hand reached up as if he wanted to touch Tony’s face, but regained control last minute. They stacked their other hand on top of the linked ones. Tony could feel Stephen’s warmth beneath his artificial palm. The technology wasn’t perfect, but Tony was a tinkerer. One day it would be, and one day he’d feel the sensation of encircling the love of his life once more.

“Do you, Stephen Strange, take Tony Stark as your lawfully wedded husband, to share your lives openly, standing with him in sickness and health, in joy and sorrow, in hardship and ease, to cherish and love forever more?” the officiant asked.

“I do.” There was a slight quiver in Stephen’s voice. The corners of his eyes were red. Reflected in those sky-blue eyes were Tony and Tony alone.

“Do you, Tony Stark, take Stephen Strange as your lawfully wedded husband, to share your lives openly, standing with him in sickness and health, in joy and sorrow, in hardship and ease, to cherish and love forever more?” the officiant asked. Tony had never wanted to say another phrase more. He had been ready to say them two years ago, under a field of stars. Now he finally had the chance.

“I do.”

Wong gave Peter a nudge. The young Avenger came back to reality with a start. He wiped the goofy grin off his face and stepped forth with the ring pillow. Because Tony was so happy, and because Tony was a terrible mentor, he looked down in surprise. “Where’s the ring?”

Peter gasped. He followed Tony’s gaze. On the white velvet stitched the date May 29th, 2018. Tony and Stephen had chosen to host their wedding on Tony’s forty-eighth birthday, doubling down on the celebrations. Under the date was a silk ribbon fixed to the pillow. It was tied into a bow, and at the centre of the bow rested two gleaming bands.

Peter looked back up with narrowed eyes. Tony burst out laughing. Stephen only shook his head and took the bands from Peter. The young Avenger returned to his spot.

The band had been simple in design. They had both felt they were never going to forgo their respective engagement ring; it had been with them through too much, so the design of the wedding band had to complement its flashier counterpart. In Tony’s case, it had been tricky. His left hand had fused with the gauntlet, melting the ring altogether. But Tony was nothing if not stubborn. He spent a good eight hours carving the ring out of the inside of the gauntlet, then smelted the pieces
to extract his band from the alien material. Together with Stephen, they set another stone into the band. Under the light filtering through stained-glass windows, the ring twinkled.

“Take this ring as my gift to you. Wear it and think of me, and know that I love you,” Stephen said. He pushed the wedding band onto Tony’s ring finger, stacking it on top of the engagement ring.

“With this ring, I bind my life to yours. Although that probably happened a long time ago.” Tony did the same.

The officiant nodded. “By the power of your commitment, and the power vested in me, I now pronounce you married! You may kiss!”

They both took a step forward. Stephen’s hand reached up and touched Tony’s cheek. Tony’s brain experienced a lag, so his mouth ran on auto-pilot. “Will you still love me when my goatee is sparse and grey? Not the sexy, silver fox kind, already have that going on, but the kind that looks twiggy, like it’s on its last leg.”

Stephen chuckled. “Yes. I love you, goatee or no.”

“Now that, is true love.” Their lips met. The chapel burst into applause. The claps were thundering against the walls, but it did not reach Tony. He tuned out his environment, focusing on the man before him and the comforting weight of the bands around his finger.

It was worth it. All the pain, and suffering, and heartbreak.

For this moment, it was worth it.

Chapter End Notes

If you thought this was a self-indulgent wedding chapter, you are 98 and ¾ percent correct. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
The after party was wild. In hindsight, Tony was thankful everyone had stayed put until the ceremony ended. Drinks had been flowing during cocktail hour, and after dinner and speeches, it was high time to get the celebrations started.

Tony waded through the crowd. He and Stephen had begun the night with linked arms, but after many toasts and conversations, they lost each other in the sea of guests. Tony wasn’t fazed. Stephen had been a celebrity surgeon before his unexpected career change. He was familiar with an audience. Tony himself had recently left a conversation with Shuri. The Princess of Wakanda had been keen to discuss more, but she let Tony go because this was his big day. They had promised to keep in touch. It was kids like Peter and Shuri and Harley that assured Tony of humanity’s future.

Speaking of his little protégées, where were they? Tony searched the hall. Beyond the gargantuan floral arrangements and chattering crowds, two teenagers stood before the buffet table. Of course that was where they’d be. Dinner had served plenty of food, but growing teenagers were always in need of a snack. They were chatting while piling canapes onto their plates. Tony was glad they were getting along.

“Tony!” a booming voice called from behind. His shoulder was assaulted by a punch-like pat. Thor laughed in his signature carefree style and wrapped Tony in a hug. “Congratulations. My words pale in comparison to the joy in my heart, just know I am happy for you.”

“Thanks, big guy.” Tony returned the hug. The Asgardian smelled of strong, spiced liquor. Who knew what lethal concoction he’d mixed together. Thor sported a head of cropped blonde locks. He wore an unbuttoned navy dinner jacket, revealing the front of a black silk shirt. His hair had grown since it was first cut, but it still threw Tony off to see the God of Thunder sporting anything but his Asgardian braids. “Good of you to come, for a day or two we weren’t sure you were gonna make it.”

“How could I miss such an occasion, I’d cross the Nine Realms for it.” Thor downed the rest of his drink. He placed his empty flute on the tray of a passing waiter. “Can I get another one of these?”

Tony watched Thor accept the new glass. He retrieved a small flask from his breast pocket and splashed some Asgardian liquor into the champagne. Thor has come a long way from smashing his first drink in New Mexico. “So what are your plans from here?” Tony asked. “I asked Lokes, wouldn’t give me a straight answer.”

Thor looked out onto the balcony. Tony followed his gaze, finding Stephen and Loki in deep
conversation. “My brother and I will continue to search for our lost people. If there are any survivors, we will find them.”

“I may be retiring, but just know if you need anything, I’m here,” Tony said.

Thor only smiled and gave him another hug.

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“What a drab affair.”

Stephen had been leaning against the stone balustrade, with a drink in his hand and his eyes on the stars when an Aesir joined him on the balcony. Loki strolled next to him, bringing an air of blasé boredom. Stephen didn’t take his eyes off the sky. In the outskirts, faint sprinklings of silver revealed themselves to the naked eye. Only against the black of the night could one appreciate light.

“Idle chatter, awkward colleagues, people pretending to be acting in the other’s best interest… what’s the matter?” Loki gasped as Stephen spared him a glance. “Is that not why you are out here?”

“I take it that Asgardian gatherings are so much more amusing?” Stephen asked.

“The opposite, but I create the fun.”

Stephen arched a single eyebrow. “Tell me you’re behaving.” He turned to Loki. The trickster wore all black save for a green shirt. The haunted expression that had followed him since he crashed through the sanctum’s roof was gone. It was replaced by a mischievous grin, a grin which made the hairs on the back of Stephen’s neck stand up. “Loki.”

The God of Mischief rolled his eyes. “Oh shush, you sound like my mother. It was only a few drops.” Alarms blared in Stephen’s mind. He filtered through the guest list, identifying the ones with allergies. “And in the alcoholic bowl alone,” Loki added. The Aesir sighed melodramatically. “I’m a shadow of my former self.”

Stephen let out a breath of relief. He’d wondered why the punch tasted spicy. Common alcohol didn’t affect two-thirds of the guests, and he knew many who could take full strength Asgardian spirits. Stephen gave Loki a stern look then let it slip. He looked back up to admire the stars.

His moment of quiet contemplation didn’t last. A dozen Iron Sentries flew over them, redirecting helicopters filled with eavesdropping paparazzi. A man raced under the balcony. He was flanked by a patrol team and barked orders into his earpiece. Happy was back on duty. The head of security tried his best, but events like these didn’t stay behind closed doors, and especially not this late into the evening.

Stephen pushed off the balustrade. There went his peace and quiet. Perhaps he’d gotten too used to the silence of the sanctum. Nowadays he just wanted to retire early and wrap himself under a
blanket with Tony. He watched Tony through the windows, who’d no doubt crafted a witty quip, causing Thor to erupt with laughter. Loki was watching too. Stephen waited for a cutting remark about his adopted brother. It never came. Loki didn’t smile, but the corners of his eyes were soft.

Stephen recalled the first time he had seen Loki. Behind the glowing screen, the crossfire, and the Tesseract’s expanding portal had been a jaded Aesir. He had been stunted by Asgard, and his pride wounded by circumstance. He’d sought revenge, but revenge on whom? The father who favoured his own blood? The kingdom that would not accept his rule? Or the brother who had everything he thought he wanted?

Years had flown since. Stephen was glad that Loki found his place. He raised his glass. “To peace?”

Loki lowered his head in thought, then did the same. “To peace.”

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Peter rarely disliked someone on principle, but for some reason, the boy before him convinced him of hate at first sight. “I’m the original protégée,” the boy, Keener, said.

Peter ground his back molars together. Following the defeat of Thanos, Tony had finally granted him full access to the Avengers database. In Peter’s defence, he wasn’t being nosy, but Tony’s file had recordings of all the missions Iron Man had flown. It was a treasure trove of knowledge. How to diffuse situations, how to plan efficiently, how to prioritise tasks…Peter had to give it a browse. That was when he found out about the existence of Harley Keener.

Instead of a lone photo of himself under the category of ‘protégée’, another snap of a lanky boy from Tennessee sat above him. Compared to the photo, Keener had cleaned up for the occasion. The sides of his shoulder length mop had been shaved, and the top gelled into lose spikes. He wore a fitting grey suit. Keener noticed Peter giving him a once-over and raised his chin. “I bought this myself, unlike someone. Tony helped me register my own company this year. I’m selling my inventions online. He set me a goal, and once I reach it, he’ll extend a formal invitation to sign me on as a consultant for the Avengers.”

If it were any other person, Peter would congratulate them and ask about their work, but there was something about Keener that rubbed Peter the wrong way. Keener, with his stupid self-assured smile, stupid lanky frame, and stupid self-bought suit. Original protégée my ass, Peter thought.

“Well, can you do this?” Peter had been piling his plate with snacks when Keener cornered him. He shot a web further down the table. With a flick of his wrist, a chicken wrap flew into his hand. He bit a large chunk off the wrap, revelling in Keener’s pursed lips.


Peter took another bite off his wrap. “Yeah, I’ll be waiting alright, as an official member of the Avengers.”
Steve sat in the corner of the hall, watching the crowd. From his vantage point he could see the entire expanse of frescos adorning the walls and ceiling. Steve admired the artwork. Beneath gods and angels were a row of columns that allowed guests to pass but divided the space in two. On the other side were the drinks and catering. On Steve's side, was the dancefloor.

The venue was beautiful, but the people were the stars of the show. He didn’t belong here, not with his stiff smile and stiff shoulders. Everyone knew there were people Tony had invited out of courtesy alone. Over the years he and Tony had made peace with each other. They worked together, but they never became close. Strange had taken every opportunity to remind him that. The crack between the consultants and the founding members of the Avengers had faded, but it never fully went away. Steve only hoped that with Tony and Strange becoming consultants themselves, the tension could be dissolved.

“Aren’t you the face of festive cheer.” There was a nudge on his shoulder, followed by a tumbler of scotch dangling before his face. Steve took it as Sam sat beside him. He surveyed the dancefloor. The night was beginning to pick up like a cauldron coming to boil. A handful of people dipped in and out of the floor, in tune with the lively music. So far, none had dared to take centre stage.

“She’s gone, Steve,” Sam said. Steve lowered his head. No distant laughter could penetrate the silence that enveloped them. “You’re a good man,” Sam took a swig from his tumbler, “loyal to a fault, but you gotta move on. There’s nothing left for you back there.”

Steve ran a hand down his face. He knocked his tumbler against Sam’s and downed half the content. They sat there for a while, observing the crowd. “What will you do, now that it’s over?”

Sam shrugged. “Return to the Air Force with Rhodes, probably. With all this talk of retirement, I reckon I’ve got a few more years left in me.” Steve’s gaze found the pair standing by the window. Clint was talking with Natasha. He’d told Steve his decision beforehand. His little boy learned to write for the first-time last month. He wasn’t there. He didn’t want to miss any more firsts. “You?” Sam asked.

“Continue what I’m doing now, track down Hydra with Buck. Maybe try to move on, like you said.” Steve let out a small laugh. Sam nodded, then gave him a firm pat on the back.
Fast metabolism had always been a problem for Bruce. It became especially unmanageable with the addition of Hulk. Half of his pay check went toward food. Today was no different.

*Hulk, hungry,* the green giant said in his head. Since taking up Tony’s advice, Bruce had begun to chat with his alter ego. Communication was the gateway to understanding. After figuring out the Hulk was just as alone and confused as he was, the talks increased in frequency until they became comfortable with hearing each other’s thoughts on the fly. It was exhausting to have two people inside the same body, but Bruce was no longer afraid. Unless provoked, the Hulk was a surprisingly tender creature.

Bruce strolled toward the buffet table. If there was one place he wouldn’t go hungry, it was here. Beneath the towering floral arrangements was an undulating sea of food. He grabbed a plate and loaded it with dainty canapes. One of the most popular dishes was the blini topped with crème fraiche and caviar. Bruce popped one into his mouth. The savoury roe exploded against his tongue.

*Hulk, like.* Bruce smiled. Perhaps he and the Hulk weren’t so different after all. While Bruce concentrated on loading his plate, Barnes joined him. Such were the woes of maintaining a high calorie diet. Bruce sighed in understanding. He’d expected to see Barnes here. What he hadn’t expected was the racoon on his tail.

“How much for the arm?” Rocket asked.

“It’s not for sale.” Barnes didn’t bat an eyelash. He saw the caviar and did the same as Bruce.

“Well…it’s a nice arm. Can I get you a drink?”

“Thanks, but I have my own.” Barnes exchanged nods with Bruce then went on his way.

“I’ll get that arm…” Rocket mumbled as he scratched the back of his head. Bruce cleared his throat. “What? Ah, don’t worry, I’m just fooling around.” Rocket padded away with a laugh that didn’t at all sound reassuring. Bruce supposed it was none of his business. After the war, the Guardians became official allies of the Avengers. Rocket wouldn’t try anything serious…right?

Bruce shuffled down to the drinks section. He saw the bowl of frothy fruit punch and thought of the two grumps he’d seen on his way over. Bruce peered over his shoulder. Wong and Nebula hadn’t budged. They leaned against the wall, side by side, with mirroring crossed arms and downturned lips. Maybe a drink or two would loosen them up. Bruce balanced his plate on his forearm and grabbed two empty tumblers.

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It wasn’t until late that Tony bumped into Stephen again. He was feeling giddy, so he gave his newly minted husband a kiss. Stephen deepened it. When they parted a familiar voice rang from the speakers.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. The Galaxy’s Hottest Mixes is back by popular demand and we are taking requests,” Quill said from the DJ booth. He circled his arms
around Gamora’s waist, who was busy adjusting the mic to suit Quill. “The first song of the evening is dedicated to the birthday boy from his beloved husband, so kick back, relax, and enjoy the tune.” Quill gave Stephen a thumbs up.

The announcement by their impromptu DJ had caught the hall’s attention. The Master of the Mystic Arts strolled onto the centre of the dancefloor. The lights dimmed, save for a beam that followed Stephen. He leaned forward, then extended his left hand toward Tony. “Care for a dance?”

_Show off_. Tony couldn’t help his grin. He pretended to ponder the question, then joined Stephen under the spotlight. He placed his right into the waiting hand. It was as if a magnetic force had pulled them close. They rested their foreheads against each other, their lips an inch apart, and swayed to the beat of the music.

_Wave the night has come_  
_And the land is dark_  
_And the moon is the only light we'll see_  
_No I won't be afraid, no I won't be afraid_  
_Just as long as you stand, stand by me_  

_So darlin', darlin', stand by me, oh stand by me_  
_Oh stand by me, stand by me_  

_More guests joined them. First Quill and Gamora, then Pepper and Rhodey. The dancefloor was open to any and all, and soon it was filled with swirling duos. The guests kindly refrained from sharing their spotlight, giving Tony and Stephen space to manoeuvre. Tony hadn’t danced since their last spin in the gym post-Vormir. He was a little rusty, as should Stephen, but the man had clearly practiced in private. Under his guidance, they glided across the hall, leaving guests gasping in awe._

_Tony revelled in the moment. He took his time to adjust. Then, having regained his rhythm, he spun Stephen in a tight circle and dipped him down low, earning them applause from the crowd. He was grinning so widely, his cheeks ached. Heat radiated from his chest, basking him in the warmth of a thousand suns. Under dazzling chandeliers and smiling angels, Tony twirled._

_If the sky that we look upon_  
_Should tumble and fall_  
_Or the mountains should crumble to the sea_  
_I won't cry, I won't cry, no I won't shed a tear_  
_Just as long as you stand, stand by me_  

_And darlin', darlin', stand by me, oh stand by me_  
_Oh stand now by me, stand by me, stand by me-e, yeah_  

_Where they went, music followed. Tony saw the doors leading to the balcony and crossed the threshold. They continued to spin under the open sky. The guests hadn’t joined. They were alone in_
each other’s company. Tony tightened his hold on Stephen’s waist. Their footsteps slowed as Tony rested his head on Stephen’s shoulder. Following the rush of adrenalin was a sense of calmness. They shuffled lazily until an orange spaceship flew over the estate.

“Sir, we have in coming,” Jarvis said. Tony donned his glasses. As he switched on the group coms, hysterical laughter assaulted his ears. Drax and Mantis were inside the Milano. Tony was about to ask what for when a red sphere exploded in the night sky. The edge of the sphere fizzed out as it expanded, lively like wisps of fire. The red was followed by gold, then green and blue. The Milano painted a rainbow of colours in the dark. The spheres were magnificent, but the ship had more tricks up its tuned wings. Now that it commanded the people’s attention, the Milano released a circle of fireworks with the ship at the centre, then bright ribbons that criss-crossed together, then a fan of silver flares.

The burning colours were etched into Tony’s mind. The hand holding his caressed the stacked rings on his finger. Tony looked to Stephen, whose face was illuminated by the changing lights. Today marked the end of the journey they had embarked all those years ago. Tony supposed he should feel wistful, but the truth was, he had no time for sorrow. Stephen was by his side. Things were finally alright. None of them knew what tomorrow would bring, and perhaps that was the way it should be.

Before them was an open road. Possibilities stretched endlessly in every direction. It was adventure that had brought them together, and hand in hand, they would begin many, many more.

Chapter End Notes

As Tony and Stephen begin the next chapter of their lives, the journey we started one and a half years ago is about to end. Next week is the epilogue, which will conclude this series. Thank you to everyone who has made it this far. There will be more thoughts when the epilogue is posted.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Two days after his wedding, Tony gathered those who had been involved in the war. Together, they deconstructed the gauntlet, and freed the Infinity Stones from their sockets.

The Time Stone was returned to Stephen. He sealed the green gem back into the Eye of Agamotto, then placed the artefact behind a powerful ward in the depths of Kamar Taj.

The Guardians were entrusted with the Power Stone. Following the destruction of Xandar, they understood the stone’s knack for trouble. They promised to find a safe hiding place, and at Tony’s request, didn’t reveal its location to the Avengers.

The Aesirs took charge over concealing Space and Reality. Thanks to his vast knowledge of the Nine Realms, Loki had a spot in mind. Likewise, Tony requested that they kept the location to themselves.

With the lack of a better alternative, Wakanda accepted the Mind Stone. Save for the people present, who knew the stone’s vague location, T’Challa told only his father. The Prince and Princess of Wakanda locked the stone in a vault isolated from their people, where it’d hopefully never see the light of day again.

This left Tony with the Soul Stone. The orange gem that had traversed the Crossroads with him showed no signs of decay. Tony was the only one who could command it. The stone had no corporeal form and was therefore impossible to hide. Tony wanted so desperately to be rid of the thing, but he suspected the stone would return to the altar in Vormir, where it’d await the next fool. So begrudgingly, Tony held on to it. He pushed their link to the back of his mind and tried his best not to think about it.

Three days after his wedding, Tony and Stephen bid the Aesirs farewell. He walked Thor and Loki to the front of the compound and watched them disappear in a blinding pillar of light. “Isn’t the Bifrost destroyed?” Tony asked as he and Stephen stared at the sizzling seal on their lawn. “Axe or no, this is a bug.”

Stephen smiled and shook his head. He turned to Quill, who was fiddling with the Stark pod Tony gave him. “How many song’s on this thing?” Quill asked.

“Over a thousand,” Stephen said.

Quill’s draw dropped. “Get out.”

“I curated the list myself. The pod has a terabyte of storage, plenty of room for future additions,
completed with Bluetooth and external audio,” Stephen said as Quill flicked through the albums, pausing when his thumb brushed past Awesome Mix Vol. 1.0 and 2.0. “With all the classics included, of course.”

Tony grinned as Quill threw his hands into the air. “Sure you don’t wanna stay forever?” he asked the green lady beside him.

“We can’t keep touring the states,” Gamora said. “There are only so many hamburgers I can eat.”

“Bet you haven’t tried them all.” Gamora gave him a pointed look. Tony shrugged. “Hey, cheeseburgers after a hard-won battle is tradition. I’m not making this up.” The two of them stood in comfortable silence, watching Stephen and Quill play with the Stark pod.

“I never thanked you for saving everyone,” Gamora said out of the blue. They looked over her shoulder, where Rocket, Groot, Mantis, Drax, and Nebula were loading supplies onto the ship. “So um…thank you.”

“It’s what I do.” Tony gave her a wink. Gamora smiled and beckoned for Quill to join them. The captain of the Milano cleared his throat and held out a device the size of a tuna can. “What’s this?” Tony accepted it.

“That’s a cross-galaxy transmitter,” Quill said. Tony resisted the urge to pull it apart. He turned the device over in his hands. It was painted with the Guardian’s crest. A single button lay in the centre, next to a green light. “Look, we’re not good with this mushy stuff. We appreciate everything you’ve done for us. If you need us, give us a buzz, but for important things only, like if Earth is on fire.” Quill thought about it, then added: “I suppose you could buzz if you missed us too. Damn, should’ve included a non-emergency button, or turned it into a pager, but then it’d sacrifice range…” Gamora gave him a long-suffering poke in the side. Quill tried to protect his fragile flank and failed miserably.

“Oh yeah, one more thing.” Quill looked over Tony and Stephen and straightened his back. “We’ve decided to make you two honorary members of the Guardians of the Galaxy, congratulations.”

“Does that mean I get a discount next time I’m in space?” Tony quipped.

“Enemies, maybe. Discounts, not so much.”

The four of them laughed. “Hey captain, we’re ready to fly.” Rocket yelled over the ruckus. “Oh, wait a second, I’m the captain! Let’s just go and leave these losers,” he said to Groot.

“He’s never letting that go.” Quill sighed. “Well folks, until next time.”

“Until next time.” Tony nodded. Quill and Gamora join the rest of the Guardians. They boarded the Milano. Groot waved at them as the door to the hull retracted. Tony waved back. When the boarding was complete, music flowed into his ears.

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Listen baby, ain't no mountain high
Ain't no valley low, ain't no river wide enough baby
If you need me call me no matter where you are
No matter how far (don't worry baby)
Just call my name I'll be there in a hurry
You don't have to worry
Tony laughed. What a cheeky bastard. The Milano hovered into the air. Her thrusters glowed white-hot, the heat bright enough to light up any stretch of sky.

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Remember the day I set you free  
I told you you could always count on me darling  
From that day on, I made a vow  
I'll be there when you want me  
Some way, some how  

Cause baby there ain't no mountain high enough  
Ain't no valley low enough  
Ain't no river wide enough  
To keep me from getting to you babe  

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The ship cruised along, then shoot into the distance as it entered FTL travel. The Guardians had been the last to depart. He and Stephen returned to the compound. They picked up a few gadgets, then headed for the portal that connected the compound to Stark Tower. Now that there was no war, most of the Avengers had returned to their private lives. Tony took in the empty rooms. There had been a time when all he wanted to do was fill these rooms with people, to remind himself that he was accepted and loved. Looking back, perhaps it hadn’t been the rooms he wanted to fill, but the void in his heart.

Now it has been filled, by a man who completed him and turned his house into a home.

Tony looked at the man beside him. Together, they crossed the portal.

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Over the following year, Tony slowly transitioned from the role of an active Avenger. News of his retirement shocked the world. Iron Man had long become a household name. He had been leading the Avengers since the organisation’s establishment; the public couldn’t imagine a team without him. For a time, letters pleading for him to reconsidered flooded Stark Tower, but Tony was determined.

It had been difficult to find another candidate to fill his shoes, so Tony split up the tasks, passing some to Rhody, some to Steve, and some to the administrative body. Despite converting to
consultantship, Tony continued to bankroll Avenger operations, keeping the organisation private.

At Rhodey’s request, they held a ceremony in Times Square the day he officially resigned. Tony hadn’t paid the occasion much attention, but on the day, the square was jam-packed with thousands of people, some who had flown from overseas to see their favourite hero as an Avenger one last time. President Ellis rewarded him with a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award one could receive. Tony accepted the medal and hid his reddened eyes behind his sunglasses. He had worked so hard, for so many years. He never asked, or thought he’d receive anything in return, but the people he fought for remembered.

Alongside Tony, Stephen redrafted his contract with the Avengers. He embraced consultantship, answering calls only as he was needed. With all the time in the world, he and Tony focused on expanding Stark Industries. They released a slew of new products which bedazzled the tech industry.

Though as Earth’s strongest sorcerer, Stephen had no choice but to accept the title of Sorcerer Supreme. He nullified interdimensional threats as they arose and made bi-weekly visits Kamar Taj, but otherwise distanced himself from the temple’s internal workings. Outside his routine as Sorcerer Supreme, Stephen continued to study in the New York Sanctum, where he was close to home and could ponder the mystic arts in peace.

Wong succeeded Stephen as the Master of the New York Sanctum. Though curiously, apprentices of Kamar Taj still claimed to see him in the library, peering over their shoulders as they tried to sneak into the restricted section. Kamar-Taj grew under his watchful eye. Together with Minoru and Sol Rama, they amended the sanctum’s defence mechanisms, perfecting the ancient runes that had been weakened by the passing of time.

Pepper married Happy a year after Tony and Stephen walked the aisle. Tony was invited as both the best man and the man of honour. They sealed their union with a kiss, under the raining petals of a century old wisteria tree. She kept Stark Industries in shape with an iron grip. After she amassed a trillion dollars under Tony’s name, making him the world’s first trillionaire, she donated the funds to charity, splitting them equally between the Maria Stark Foundation and the Iron Spirit Grant.

Rhodey passed down the mantle of War Machine after his two hundredth combat mission. He was offered a position to teach at the United States Air Force Academy. As an esteemed veteran and a consultant of the Avengers, Rhodey was respected by both students and staff. Two years later Sam joined him. He and Sam remained close friends and taught at the same school for many years to come.

Bruce gave up his life on the run. With him and the Hulk communicating, he no longer viewed himself as a ticking time bomb. He settled down in New York, where he remained close to his friends, and switched between being an Avenger and a radiophysicist. He encouraged others to see him and the Hulk as two separate individuals. As more people regarded the Hulk as a person in his own right, the Hulk began to open up too.

Two years following the defeat of Thanos, Thor and Loki returned to Earth. They had gathered the remaining Asgardians and sought refuge on the planet most familiar to them. With the help of Stark Industries, they built a village in Norway, tucked away neatly by the sea. The village became a popular tourist destination. As for the princes themselves, Thor took up Odin’s mantle as the Protector of the Nine Realms. Loki had no interest in what he considered charity. The trickster’s status alternated between being in a mysterious disappearance, and reading in the New York Sanctum with Stephen.
Despite their passion for exterminating Hydra, Steve and Bucky had bigger things to worry about. With Tony and Stephen officially retired, someone had to step up and fill the vacant positions. The Super Soldiers became official members of the Avengers and rented a flat together in Brooklyn.

Clint returned to his family farm. He watched his youngest grow and taught his daughter archery. Laura had been overjoyed. She no longer had to count the days until she could next see her husband. They sent their oldest off to high school together. Clint tried to convince Natasha to let go of their old ways, but after some thought, the Black Widow declined. No one knew what became of her. After Clint exited from S.H.I.E.L.D., she disappeared off the face of Earth.

The Guardians stayed true to their promise. On the few occasions Earth needed them, they showed up promptly. Stephen kept Quill up to date with the latest tunes, though despite being introduced to new tracks, the oldies were still Quill’s favourite. Gamora reconciled with Nebula. Both had been unsure of how to move on after the death of their adoptive father. They helped each other through the process, melting each other’s frozen hearts. Tony could’ve sworn Nebula laughed at one of his jokes the last time she was on Earth.

T’Challa succeeded his father as the King of Wakanda. It was a peaceful transition, followed by a week of festivities. Despite their integration into the rest of humanity, the Wakandans kept mostly to themselves. They scarcely granted visitor visas and proved to be a fierce competitor on the world stage. With the sole exception of Starbucks, international companies struggled to gain a foothold in the nation. To this day, it remained a mystery how the coffee giant got approved so quickly.

Ten years following the retirement of Iron Man, and ten years since the Avengers had no one official at their helm, Spider-Man stepped up as the leader of the next generation. Peter followed his mentor’s footsteps, dedicating his life to maintaining world peace. He visited Tony and Stephen weekly, seeking guidance from his childhood heroes. The new generation of Avengers trained in the same compound the founding members trained. They protected Earth with fierce dedication and were adored by the public.

Harley built his first suit of armour after graduating high school. Tony helped him fine tune the suit and watched him wobble through his first test flight. A feeling indescribable pushed Tony’s heart up his windpipe. He was so proud of the boy, but Harley was just that: a boy. Tony only hoped that unlike Peter, he could shield Harley from the dangers a little longer. As it turned out, there was no such thing as a careful protégée under a reckless mentor. Harley made many mistakes, but he learned from them. He flew faster, higher, steadier, until one day, Tony realised he had nothing more to teach him.

Despite the changing world, Tony and Stephen carried on as usual. They fought the battles no one else could, and stayed behind when the young Avengers could handle themselves. Tony’s body experienced a period of sickness following the war, the strain of a decade’s worth of Avenging finally caught up. Stephen helped him get through those rough days and nights. They woke each other from nightmares and stayed awake together when the other couldn’t sleep.

Day by day, Tony’s body healed. The nightmares decreased in frequency, and one fine afternoon, his left arm stopped hurting. Tony sat on the couch of his penthouse in Stark Tower, marvelling at the discovery. Familiar voices chattered behind him. He and Stephen had dubbed Thursday night pasta night. Tony looked around. Stephen was wrapped in his usual apron, baking a new recipe as per Friday’s instructions. Peter and Harley had rolled battle strategies out on the dinner table. They sat shoulder to shoulder, engaged in heated debate. Rhodey was on the phone next to the window. The door to the penthouse chimed. Jarvis opened it, and in came Pepper and Happy. Board meeting had gone overtime again.
Tony accepted the wine from the couple, then strolled into the kitchen, dropping it off on the counter. He threw his arms around the man that was hard at work. Stephen told him to stop loitering and start being useful. Tony laughed and kissed him.

Stephen’s lips were warm. His shirt smelled like the sun. Tony had been lost. Now he was home.

He wouldn’t trade this. Not for anything.

Renew.

-Fin-

Tony and Stephen will return.

Chapter End Notes

Here it is folks, the end of the journey we began one and a half years ago. I can't believe this series has been ongoing for so long. Parts of the story has been difficult to write, but the end result was more than worth it. I'm so thankful for the love and support I've received along the way. It felt so satisfying to write that wedding and give the characters the happiness they deserve.

Another huge thank you to my lovely beta: Missaness, for sharing her wisdom and being such an awesome friend. Without her this fic would not have been possible.

The MCU is near and dear to me. I will most likely be posting more fics or adding one-shots to this series in the future, so feel free to subscribe to my author profile or 'IronStrange MCU Overhaul' for update alerts.

Not gonna lie, I'm scared for Endgame. But no matter what happens in the next phase of the MCU, the characters we hold dear to us will always exist in our fondest memories. Inside our minds, they fight baddies, kick names, take ass, and go on one exciting adventure after the next. They are forever lively, forever golden.

Finally, to all my readers both old and new, thank you for staying with this fic until the very end. Some of you has been around since the early chapters of Anew, and I am so
thankful for your support. I hope our paths cross again. Until next time. ;D

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