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The Infinity Knot

by Canuck_Lex

Summary

A continuation of The Tie That Binds.

Dr. Bruce Banner and former SHIELD Director, Agent Phil Coulson, have escaped from their respective captors (with a little help from their friends).

Arriving on Earth, they must unite our mightiest heroes to face the biggest challenge that any of them could have imagined.

But all is not as it seems. A long dormant nemesis arises one last time, threatening to fracture the team when the world needs them the most.

And the fate of half the universe lies in their hands...

(And paws. And roots.)

An Avengers - Agents of SHIELD Infinity War.
Chapter Summary

In which the author conducts some summaries and housekeeping.

Author’s Note

So, hi. Hopefully you’ve joined me from Part One of this series, *The Tie That Binds*. No worries if you haven’t (do go take a look if you have a few moments, though).

Just to recap a few things and a little bit of housekeeping before we go on. Or hit Next Chapter to skip this and get right to the action.

This is an Infinity War story. Throughout the chapters I will be integrating plot points and dialogue originally from in *Avengers: Infinity War Part One*. All credit for these parts should be given to the writers, cast and crew of this movie. Also, note the warnings and tags.

For Agents of SHIELD fans, forget anything having to do with time travel and infinite loops. Didn’t happen. An important departure from canon: Coulson’s deal with Ghost Rider does not affect the GH-325 in his system. But he’s still in danger. I’ll let Robbie Reyes explain the rest. Later.

Thank you, author. Get on with it...

Ok, the premise leading up to here is that the Avengers found out that Agent Coulson was alive, and united to rescue him and the other Agents. Then they (and pretty much everyone) in the Agents of SHIELD series cleaned up the substantial mess left at the end of Season 4, resulting in the vindication of SHIELD and the Inhumans, and the rescue of Coulson from the clutches of Thanos and the Black Order. Everyone is, more or less, where they started at the beginning of Infinity War, with the exception of Thor (who, with the Guardians have skipped a little forward in the movie timeline) our SHIELD agents, who are either at an undisclosed location, celebrating getting Phil back, or are in Washington DC, helping to set up the next iteration of SHIELD.

(Isn’t it comforting that SHIELD comes back about as many times as HYDRA? But I digress...)

Get ON with it...

One last note, while I am attempting to stuff the proverbial kitchen sink into this, I have yet to see the following, so they will not be making an appearance: MCU: Netflix series, Runaways, Cloak & Dagger. I make no promises about Agent Carter or Inhumans (I’m a sucker for Lockjaw). Although there is a loophole in the first movie, Deadpool will be staying firmly in his universe.

Awww.....

Go away, Wade.

Ready? Then hit that next chapter button, and let’s get this started.

(Oh, and the author lives for kudos and comments. Just saying...) :)
The Price of Betrayal

Chapter Summary

The inhabitants of the Black Order Prison ship staged a desperate attempt to slow down Thanos' approach to Earth.

It failed.

The beginnings of Infinity War.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’ve met gods. Gods bleed.”

~ Director Phil Coulson, The Team (Agents of SHIELD, Season 3, Episode 17)

Black Order Prison Ship

Valkyrie attempted to rise to her feet. Thanos’ lackey merely smirked, and knocked her feet back out from underneath her. She felt the point of the female warrior’s sword at her throat.

The smell of blood, from many different species, filled her nostrils. The sounds of the dying, their moans silenced with a sudden finality, made her shake with rage.

It was a desperate last stand of the universe, the inmates on this hellhole of a ship united to give Thor Odinson of Asgard and Phillip Coulson of Terra time to reach their allies on Midgard. To prepare them for something worse than Ragnarok.

It had been from the start, and wordlessly acknowledged by all, a futile cause. Thanos’ army had merely stood back and let his...children... handle the bulk of the fighting.

It had been a slaughter.

"Father wants you alive, Asgardian.” her enemy hissed. “Or I would enjoy seeing the last of the Valkyries fall under my sword.”

The point dug fractionally deeper into her skin.

"Proxima..."

It withdrew.

"Bring her."

Valkyrie got to her feet warily, her eyes on Proxima the whole time.

"Move."
They made their way through the dead and the dying towards the front of the room, where the Black Order had assembled. A calculated shove to the back of the shoulders sent Valkyrie to her knees.

"Lady Brunnhilde, so glad you could join us." called a familiar voice.

She stared wearily across the room at Loki, his position mirroring hers, yet he gave her a regal nod as if they were in the courts of Asgard. The surviving leaders of the rebellion were spaced out, some slumped in defeat, others steadfast in their defiance.

A voice rumbled from the shadows.

"I know what it's like to lose. 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, destiny arrives all the same. And now it's here… or should I say I am."

Thanos's gaze swept across the circle, landing finally on Loki. Loki lifted his head, and met the Titan's gaze evenly, then returned it to Valkyrie.

"I assure you, Lady. The sun will shine on us again."

Thanos scowled.

"Your optimism is misplaced, Asgardian. And, as usual, you have chosen the wrong side. You had your chance to join my Order when you handed over the Tesseract. Instead, you betrayed me from the beginning."

"You knew." Loki stated.

It was not a question.

Thanos inclined his head.

"My son Ebony watched as you freed your...brother and the human, and sent them back to Earth. We observed you festering rebellion among the prisoners here these last few months. And we heard every word of your conversation with the one called Captain America in Russia."

"A distraction...."

"And you served us well in that regard. Now, we have no more need of you."

Loki shook his head.

"You underestimate him."

Thanos gave a cruel chuckle.

"Your brother?"

"No, he's still a buffoon." Loki sighed. "The human. Phil Coulson. Remember that name, Thanos. Many others have made your mistake. And many of those are dead."
"The people of Xandar fell before the might of one Infinity Stone. What can a powerless human do against two? Or more?"

Ebony Maw gazed at his lord in adoration, his eyes resting on the golden glove fitting his hand. Two stones, blue and red caught and reflected the light, making them sparkle.

"My humble personage… bows before your grandeur." Ebony simpered. "No other being has ever had the might, nay the nobility, to wield not one, but 2 Infinity Stones. The universe lies within your grasp."

Thanos turned his sights on the rest of the Black Order.

"There are 2 more Stones on Earth. Find them, my children, and bring them to me on Titan." he ordered.

Proxima Midnight bowed.

"Father, we will not fail you."

Unexpectedly, Loki spoke up.

"If I might, interject… If you're going to Earth, you might want a guide. I do have a bit of experience in that arena."

Valkyrie gasped.

"You traitor!"

Loki shrugged.

"Thanos does have a point, my dear. Perhaps it is time to rethink my course of actions."

Thanos sneered.

"If you consider failure experience."

Loki got to his feet, and began to approach the Titan.

"I consider experience, experience."

Another two steps.

"Almighty Thanos. I, Loki, Prince of Asgard..." he paused and glanced at Valkyrie, "Odinson, the rightful King of Jotunheim..."

Still closer.

"...god of mischief, do hereby pledge to you, my undying fidelity."

At the word fidelity, Loki brought forward his hands and unleashed his stored power into a blast that covered the being. As the light faded, Valkyrie saw the Titan grab Loki by the throat, lifting him easily off the ground.
Valkyrie instinctively tried to rise to her feet, but found herself held in place. Looking around the circle, she saw others struggle against the forces holding them.

Ebony Maw merely smiled, turning his attention back to his lord.

Thanos considered his prisoner.

"'Undying.' You should choose your words more carefully."

His hand began to contract around the man's slender throat, carefully, methodically cutting off his air.

As Loki's vision dimmed, he gathered the strength and breath for one last cry. Looking into the veil that separated mortalities, he knew the truth, and he flung it into his murderer's face.

"You…" he gasped, "will never be… a god."

Thanos's hand contracted, and the god of mischief went still. He dropped the body to the ground.

"No resurrections this time."

He turned his attention to the leader of the prisoners, a blue skinned being, who stared up at him in defiance.

"The rest of you have earned your fates. And I have no further need for...hostages. Die, knowing you have doomed you and yours with you."

"I will die, Thanos. But I will die defying you in the names of Loki and Coul-son until my last breath." the being snarled.

The others chorused their assent. Thanos shrugged.

"Fine with me."

Thanos turned his attention to Valkyrie, who was hoisted to her feet by Proxima.

"I will tear you apart for this, Thanos." she growled, struggling to get to him.

"I don't think so." he responded simply. "You have a different destiny, last of the Valkyrie. Last of Asgard. You will bear witness for me, across the universe, of the fate of all those who defy me."

"King Thor will..."

"Yes, he probably will. Try, that is. But you have to find him first."

Thanos made a gesture, and a portal opened.

Proxima smiled slowly, and dragged the woman across the floor to it.

Thanos turned his back.

"Deal with her and the ship. Then you have your mission."
Proxima bowed her head in assent. Then she hurled Valkyrie through the portal.

As she tumbled into the darkness, the last thing she heard before the portal closed was the cry,

"For LOKI! For..."

Then it was cut off, and she was falling through space and time.

CODA

"Uh...Lady? Damn it. Come on chica, open your eyes."

A hand was shaking her shoulders.

Valkyrie opened her eyes slowly. A slender man, Midgarian in looks, dusky and worn pulled away.

"Is...this...Midgard? What they call Earth?"

He stilled.

"No, it's not. Where did you come from? You fell from out of nowhere, almost right into my...friends...over there."

Gazing over, she saw smouldering piles of...something.

"Earth...I must find Thor...Thanos..."

He stood up.

"Thanos? What does he want with Earth?"

"Destruction. It has started with Loki, and the remainder of Asgard today...He..."

Her eyes closed, and she slumped back to the ground.

A god has died today.

"So?"

The man bowed his head.

Vengeance is required. I am required. We are required. On Earth.

"For Loki?"

For who he finally fought against. An ultimate evil is close to winning. I am...sorry. But it is time. He knew it would come.

The man nodded, tears threatening to fall.
"We clean up here. This woman fills us in, so we don't go in blind. And then...we will return. We will...complete...our bargain."

**With Phil Coulson. Then we will deal with Thanos. Agreed.**

Robbie Reyes, the Ghost Rider, picked up the unconscious body of the woman who had come crashing into his world. Then he strode off into the mist.


"Dread it, run from it, destiny arrives all the same."

**Chapter End Notes**

And we're off. And Loki is...well.. I'm sorry. :(  

I thought his death was a little OOC in Infinity War, hopefully this pulls it back towards where he was in Thor: Ragnarok.

So in the previous installment, Coulson and Thor/Asgardians wound up being held on a Black Order prison ship (rather than tossed through time/attacked outright). Loki was a double agent on behalf of Asgard from the start, and has now paid the ultimate price for his "betrayal".

Most chapters won't have this much of the movie in them, it was necessary to get it started off here.

And Phil's deal...yeah. He's in trouble...(He's always in trouble. We're used to it by now.)

Next up, back on earth, Dr. Banner and Agent Coulson are spreading the word about Thanos, and a plan by our Earth-bound heroes is formed. But someone is lurking in the shadows with their own agenda, threatening to derail it all...
Together Again

Chapter Summary

In which Agent Phil Coulson starts off on his mission to reunite the Avengers and get the world ready for Thanos.

The others are just a _little_ bit ahead of him.

(He really should’ve insisted on more information on the Milano...)

Unfortunately, so is General Katherine Hale...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New Avengers Mansion

"AC! I mean...Coulson..."

Phil Coulson smiled in relief as Daisy Johnson ran up to him in the hallway. Now two of his team were safe. And, if he had to be honest with himself, the two most important to him. He'd take his blessings where he could find them.

"Daisy, it's good to see you." he responded, and pulled her into a hug. "I missed you..."

"Me too..."

A slight snuffle was heard, but it was hard to tell from whom it had come.

Clint Barton nudged Melinda May.

"AC?" he asked. "What the hell, May? I never got to call Coulson anything like that. Why can she call him...OOF..."

May never cracked a smile as her elbow came out of Clint's midsection, but her eyelids wrinkled slightly.

Letting Daisy go, Phil turned to Clint.

"I seem to recall other terms for me coming out of your mouth, Agent Barton."

"But I didn't mean any of them!" Clint protested.

Phil and Daisy chuckled.

"Your after actions reports indicated otherwise, Barton." commented Maria Hill, joining the group in the hallway.
Phil's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Maria? I thought you were...that...we were cutting off all contact after the Accords..."

Maria smirked.

"It seemed that some of your old friends took exception to you being dead. And then 'most-wanted'. I got dragged in to help keep them in line."

Phil's eyes narrowed.

"Who? I assume Clint here, but..."

"Just what did your extraction team tell you?" asked May.

"Apparently not nearly enough." responded Phil.

"Then I think it's only fair," responded Maria, "that you find out for yourself."

"Hell, yes..." added Clint.

Phil's mouth opened in indignation, but Maria cut him off.

"Dr. Banner's returned, and he's made contact with Strange."

His mouth snapped closed.

"When?" he demanded.

"This afternoon." Maria confirmed.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Then we don't have much time." Phil turned to the others. "Thor told me he had sent Banner, Heimdall and some others to try to get to Earth. If Dr. Banner is here, then Thanos and his army can't be far behind."

He turned to Daisy.

"Get the rest of the team up. We'll need to get in touch with Banner, and...Strange, was it? See what they know."

Phil started down the hall.

"Then someone is going to have to get in contact with Stark and Captain Rogers. Bang some heads together, make them at least work with each other. Figure out how to get some government contact, maybe see if Hunter and Bobbi...are..."

He stopped and turned. The others where where he had left them. Daisy looked like she was a cat
who had gotten her canary. Maria was chuckling. Clint was doubled over, his face in his hands.

Even May was smirking at him.

"Is the impending end of the world that amusing?" Phil asked, coming back down the hall. "Or what exactly am I missing?"

Daisy flickered him a salute.

"I'll go roust out Mack and Yo-Yo. I'll meet you in the conference room."

As she left, Phil turned to May.

"Fitzsimmons?"

"They're all right too, Phil." she answered. "On a fact-seeking trip in England."

"Maybe it's better they're not here for this. I don't think Earth science is going to stop Thanos and his group." He sighed. "Now, where is this conference room?"

"This way, Director."

Lights illuminated a pathway down the hall.

Phil jumped. Clint burst out laughing.

"What the hell?"

"Thank you, FRIDAY..." Clint managed between wheezes. "Follow the light, Phil..."

Phil narrowed his eyes.

"Not just yet, Barton. I want to know..."

"We'll explain when we get there." interrupted Maria. "Let's move."

As they went down the hall, Phil had time for one more question.

"Who's the Director?"

In the conference room, Maria and May began setting up the conferencing system. Clint tossed Phil a bottle of water.

"Have you eaten, boss?"

"No, but I can wait..."

"You really should eat, Coulson."

Yo-Yo Rodriguez shoved a plate and a fork at him.
"Leftovers. Turtle Man's casserole."

Mack grinned over her shoulder. "If I'd have known you were coming tonight, it would've been fancier." he apologized.

"No, this is good."

Phil sat it down at the table. Daisy came up behind the other Agents, and gave him a pointed look.

"Eat, Coulson."

"There's no time..."

"It's going to take a couple of minutes, Coulson." called over Maria. "Eat."

"I don't need any mother hens..." he muttered.

May joined the group, and whispered to Phil.

"Eat it, or you'll wear it." she threatened. "We lost you, Phil. We didn't know if we'd ever see you again."

He gaze softened as he looked at the three younger agents. Mack's arm was around Elena's waist and she leaned into him, their eyes never leaving their leader. Daisy hovered in the background.

Phil picked up the plate and took a bite.

"Still got it, Mack."

They all relaxed.

"Missed you, boss. Glad you're back."

Mack slid into his seat, Elena briefly gave Phil a hug before taking a place beside him. Daisy wandered over and chatted with Clint as Phil finished up his plate.

He cocked his head at his protegees.

"It's far too late to separate those two, isn't it?" he murmured to May.

"Yep."

"They've already compared notes, haven't they?"

"Extensively."

"All right." he sighed, finishing his water. "Maria, can we get this started? Time is running short."

He looked around. There were far too many empty seats in this room.

"You know, can we just move this somewhere smaller?"
Maria shook her head, touched her ear.

"Dr. Strange. Thank you, you were right. Yes, he's here. If you and Wong could pick up the people at your ends, I'd appreciate it."

Phil leaned over to May.

"I never really appreciated how lame we looked on the coms..."

Maria's eyes narrowed. Then she smirked, and Phil realized, just a little too late, that it was the 'You don't know how much trouble you're in. But I do.' smirk.

May put a hand on his arm.

"Don't panic."

Then the portal opened.

---

**New York City**  
**Stark Tower**

It was promising to be a quiet evening at the Tower. A good night for some reconnection.

"Tony, if you even think about going down to the shop..."

"When you've only returned, Pepper, my love? Perish the thought."

Pepper Potts simply smiled, sitting on Tony Stark's couch. Damn, he had missed her, especially these last few months. He could have used her advice on the One World, One People Inhumans' initiative, but she was needed elsewhere, and it wasn't exactly something he could discuss on the phone.

He brought her glass of wine over and leaned in for a kiss. Returning it, she smiled.

"It's nice to know I have your full attention."

"I'm glad you're home." Tony sat beside her. "I know I said we'd take all the time you needed for the engagement, but running off to Singapore for months on end?"

Pepper frowned.

"Sorry, but the mess in SI Asia wasn't something I could have predicted. I mean, I went expecting an audit, and wound up having to fire half of your staff. And I had to do it under the radar. Stock prices would have gone haywire if word of that got out."

"I'm glad you were there to deal with it."

"Annd...not you."

Tony shrugged, unrepentant.

"I was sorta busy over here myself."
"I heard." She cocked her head. "And I'm sorry I missed it, mister 'Saviour of the Inhumans'."

Tony shifted.

"They saved themselves at the end. They just needed a hand."

"Just a hand? Sounded to me like you gave them your full upper body. Government plots, Watchdog attacks, Inhumans, the reopening of the Accords?" Pepper's eyes narrowed. "And I didn't hear of any of this until I got back to New York."

"Not a lot I could tell you over the phone. I needed to make sure you were safe."

His eyes darkened, as he took his fiance's hand.

"There was a lot of people I swore I'd keep safe, and I couldn't, Peps. I needed to make sure that you, at least, weren't one of them."

"Oh, Tony."

"A lot of people have left me, Pepper Potts. You don't know what it means to me that you came back. And you know what? No more surprises. I've turned over a new leaf. We're gonna have a nice dinner tonight. With no more surprises. Ever."

As they leaned in for another kiss, a slight crackle was heard.

They pulled apart as a portal opened, and three figures came through.

"Oh, no. No, no, NO!" complained Tony, pointing his finger at them. "We agreed I had the night off, Strange."

Stephen Strange didn't move.

"Sorry, Mr. Stark, but we've been called. I need you to come with me."

"Uh, Tony? Who is this?" asked Pepper Potts.

"Pepper, Dr. Steven Strange. Dr. Strange, my CEO, Pepper Potts."

"Charmed, congratulations on your wedding, by the way. Now, Tony."

"Absolutely not. There is no reason I need to leave here..."

"Your Coulson is back."

Pepper Potts went still.

"Coulson? PHIL Coulson? He was..."

"Dead, yeah, apparently not so much. I'll explain later, after they leave."

Tony scowled at the intruders.
"I am having a nice at home night, gentlemen. Coulson's used to waiting for me, he did it an awful lot before he died. He can do it again."

Dr. Strange heaved a sigh. The second figure shuffled forward.

"Hey, Tony." Bruce Banner said.

Tony got to his feet.

"Bruce!"

"Hi, Pepper." Bruce said sheepishly.

"Hi..."

Pepper looked at Tony. She sighed.

"It's OK."

Tony flushed.

"I'm...sorry..."

"Go, Tony. We'll continue this later."

Strange glanced in her direction.

"Ms. Potts, it's not overselling to say that the fate of the universe is at stake."

"You're not helping, Strange..." muttered Tony.

Pepper sighed again.

"Go, Tony."

Tony leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"You're the best, Peps."

"And don't you forget it."

"Never."

Tony strode to join the other men. As the portal flared closed behind them, Pepper closed her eyes and finished her wine.

**New Avengers Mansion**

"What the..."
Phil jumped back. The last time he had seen a portal like that, Robbie Reyes had been creating it.

"Oh, please God, not now..." he thought, readying himself for the Rider.

A man, slightly taller than Reyes came through, and Phil relaxed slightly. He was dressed in an ornate blue robe and a striking red cloak, which seemed to tug him closer to Phil.

He lifted an eyebrow.

"Agent Coulson, I presume. Dr. Stephen Strange."

The cloak...waved?

Coulson's eyebrows rose in return.

"I know of your reputation. Did my Agent Piper find you?"

Strange nodded.

"She did, and you led us on quite a chase. We need to talk later about your actions with the Darkhold, Agent."

Phil shook his head.

"I don't know where it is, and if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"Still getting into things you shouldn't, Director Coulson?" asked the second man, coming through the portal.

Phil knew this one.

"Mr. Randolph! Good to see you turn up." He clapped him on the shoulder

Elliot Randolph smiled.

"Good to have you back. I used up my favours with NOVA Corp to get you out of that ship..."

Phil stared.

"Out of...that was you?"

"And others."

The portal flared shut, admitting the last two.

Phil swallowed nervously. He knew these as well.

"Mr. Stark. Dr. Banner."

Bruce nodded.

"It's good to see you, Agent Coulson."
"Yeah, you're looking awfully good for someone who's been dead for six years." Tony snarked.

Phil sighed. He knew he deserved this.

"Mr. Stark, I'm sorry, and I wish I had time to go into my reasonings. But Thanos is coming, and we need everyone together. We need both you and Captain..."

Tony considered him, then cracked a small smile.

"You've been gone for awhile, Agent...no one's briefed you?"

Phil pinched the bridge of his nose.

"NO." he growled.

"Oh, this is gonna be good..." Tony smirked.

As Tony slid past him, he unexpectedly clapped Phil on the shoulder.

"It's good to have you back, Phil."

"Uh...thanks?"

A second portal opened. Phil tensed.

"Started the party without us?" Lance Hunter asked, taking the room in stride.

Phil's mouth hung open.

"Oh, is that Mack's casserole? Any left?" chimed in Bobbi Morse, hot on the heels of her partner.

Wong stepped through, looked the crowd over, then snorted, and sat next to Strange. The portal closed behind him.

"Who...how..." Phil stammered.

"We just helped get the band back together." smirked Bobbi, giving Phil a hug. "Hasn't anyone told you yet?"

"$50 bucks says no..." laughed Hunter, scooping up Phil's plate.

"Don't take it Bobs..." called Clint.

Hunter scowled.

"You still here, you git?"

Clint preened.

"Nowhere better to be."
"All right, you lot, settle in!" commanded Maria.

Phil watched, stunned, as most of the empty seats started to fill up.

He turned to May. She shrugged.

"I told you they came after you..."

"Where's..."

May held up a finger and leaned in.

"Stark, can you..."

"On it."

Studying the terminal, Tony frowned, and then tapped some keys. He looked up.

"Oh, Agent, did your baby daughter Agent tell you she took your car for a spin?"

Automatically, Phil snapped, "Don't touch LOLA!"

The holowall blurred, and several figures appeared.

"Thank you for the password, Director Coulson." the first said. "I look forward to actually meeting you. Your friends have told me quite a bit about you."

"I am...honoured...King T'Challa?" Phil responded, then turned his attention to the other two.

Natasha Romanoff's glare translated quite well through the projection.

"Nat...I'm..."

"We'll...discuss...things in great detail later, Phil."

Phil nodded.

"Of course."

"I want in on that Nat..." called Clint.

Nat nodded.

Phil sighed. Then the worst.

"Captain Rogers."

"Agent Coulson. It’s been awhile."

Daisy leaned over to Clint.

"You know, I've never seen anyone give the disappointed Dad look to AC before." She considered,
watching the two stare at each other. “Well, there was this one time, back in Italy...but Jemma could tell you more about that.”

”Absolutely not, Agent Johnson,” called Phil, not taking his eyes from Steve. “That is need to know...”

”Under the circumstances, Coulson, I’d say you had very little standing on that particular argument.” Steve commented mildly. Natasha’s gaze became more deadly.

Phil looked away.

”You’re probably right, Captain. I had my reasons for staying dead. Some better than others. Some others were nothing more than avoiding hurting others. Or not facing the consequences of that avoidance.”

Steve gave a slight nod, and glanced towards Tony.

”I can relate.” he offered.

”For what it’s worth, I am sorry. I never meant to cause any of you pain. And I will still sit down and explain what happened to each and every one of you, as soon as I can. But it has to wait until after we save the world.”

”This time.” snorted May.

”Actually, the universe, not the world.” commented Strange.

”Great, we’ve graduated to the big leagues...” replied Daisy.

Steve held up his hand.

”I can appreciate it, Agent. And from what we’ve heard, you didn’t have that many options. It can wait.” He smiled. “And it’s good to have you back.” He looked at Bruce. “Both of you.”

Steve looked at Maria.

”We’ve been unable to reach Wanda, Vision and the rest in England. Agent Wisdom said it’s not uncommon, and they’re expected back within range at any point.” He frowned. “Said Excalibur had to deal with the Hole before it grew too far.”

”Not sure I like the sounds of that...” came from Hunter.

”Sam and Sharon are with the Wakandan council.” said T’Challa. “We’re monitoring for any further intrusions into our atmosphere.”

”Piper is with the Senator, setting up the new SHIELD.” informed Bobbi.

Phil blinked.

”Piper’s in charge?” he asked carefully.

”No, just getting things ready for...OWWW!” Hunter yelled. “What was that for?”

”Nearly derailing the meeting.” replied Bobbi. “Anyways, Mike Peterson is cleaning up Watchdog stragglers. And Scott and Hope decided to take some more time to figure out what they wanted to do. They all said they’d come if we needed them.”
"Rhodes is covering on the East Coast. And Parker is back at school. Where he belongs.” Tony added, glaring at Daisy at the last.

"I didn’t ask him to help at the concert...” Daisy said defensively.

"You didn't stop him, either. He nearly died with...”

"Enough, Tony, we’re not rehashing that tonight.” interjected Maria.
Phil was silent.

“You all came together.” he said finally. “Because of me?”

"To find you.” said Clint.

"Well, really, it was to find the Darkhold...” started Strange.
His cloak thwapped him across his head. May glared at him.

"You don’t learn, do you?” sighed Wong.

"You were in trouble, Phil.” said Natasha. “Of course we were coming for you.”

"You’re an Avenger. We stand by our own.” continued Steve.

"And you’re our friend.” finished Tony. “Or you were. When you died. You know what I mean.”

"Thank you. That means...so much...” Phil got out.

The room was silent, then Bruce coughed.

"Uh, guys? Not to break up the moment...but saving the world?"

All of a sudden Phil realized they were all looking towards him.
And at the same moment, he realized just who the Director was.

Again.

Oh....boy.

"Let’s get started.” Phil said. “Dr. Banner, Dr. Strange, maybe we should start with the Infinity Stones?”

CODA

General Katherine Hale looked up at the knock on the door.

"Enter.”

Her daughter Ruby slipped through.

"Mother, our guest is back.”

"And?”
Silently, Ruby held out a flash drive. Plugging it in, General Hale nodded in satisfaction at the list flashing across her screen.

"The list of Registered Inhumans under Sokavia and their addresses. Not everyone, but it will have to do."

Coming to the end, she frowned.

"This is incomplete. It’s missing the SHIELD Inhumans. Daisy Johnson. Elena Rodriguez."

Ruby shifted.

"I want Quake, mother."

"So does the Confederacy, darling. Remember that, please?"

Ruby nodded, but said nothing. Katherine was going to have to watch that.

"Inform our guest that we require the SHIELD Inhumans in our possession. Make that the highest priority."

Ruby smirked.

“Happy to comply...mother.”

"Hail HYDRA."

Chapter End Notes

And so everyone is back together again. Phil, his Agents, the Avengers...and Pepper Potts! And while yelling (or something more physical) at Phil for not returning after TAHITI might be satisfying, Thanos takes precedence. It’ll come. (Maybe...)

And unwelcome again to the Hales from Agents of SHIELD Season 5. I wonder who their guest was....

Next up, the war council plans. Time is running out.

Oh, and kudos if you know just who else gave Phil the disappointed Dad look, It happened back in Season 1... ;)

(Side note - Emmy nominations are out, and I say Agents of SHIELD was robbed. Again. :( What does Kolpack and company have to do, create a space dragon?)
Chapter Summary

The briefing on the Infinity Stones and Thanos.

And a certain Deal involving the Rider comes back to light.

Melinda May is NOT impressed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New Avengers Mansion

“Dr. Banner, Dr. Strange, maybe we should start with the Infinity Stones?”

Phil Coulson looked over at Bruce Banner, who simply shook his head. Stephen Strange nodded at Wong, and all eyes followed as Wong got up and stalked to to the centre of the room.

Wong paused for a moment, then with a complicated pass of his hands, he spread his arms. A galaxy unfurled between them, spreading to take over the conference room.

”Show off.” muttered Elliot Randolph. Strange merely smirked.

“From the dawn of the universe, there was nothing.” Wong intoned. “Then, BOOM!”

The galaxy contracted, then re-flung itself out around the heroes. Daisy Johnson stretched her hand out and allowed a planet to pass through it.

“The Big Bang sent six elemental crystals, hurdling across the virgin Universe. These Infinity Stones each control an essential aspect of existence.” Wong finished.

Strange took up the story.

”Space.”

A blue gem formed out the chaos, and hung in the middle of the room.

”Reality.”

A red gem pulsed sullenly against the darkness of space.

”Power.”

A purple gem twinkled into existence.

”Soul.”

An orange gem danced, just beyond the reach of Phil Coulson, who studied it intently.
"Mind."

The Avengers gasped, as a familiar yellow stone took its place in the room.

"And Time."

Strange joined Wong in the middle of the room. Lifting up his chain, he carefully opened the Eye of Agamotto. A green gem floated serenely.

A flash of light, and the galaxy and gems disappeared, leaving the two sorcerers alone in the middle of the room.

"Wow." commented Lance Hunter. "Have you considered Vegas?"

Bobbi Morse hit him across the back of his head.

"I never saw any of them, Agent Coulson." offered Bruce. "Thor and the rest hustled Heimdall and I onto the Grandmaster’s ship during the takeover. They caught up to us close to Earth. He could only send me through the portal before..."

Bruce bowed his head.

"All he told me was a name. Thanos."

"In the hands of Death..." murmured Melinda May.

Phil nodded.

"I never met Thanos. But I met some of his...children during my...sessions."

He shuddered slightly. Tony Stark frowned in concern.

"And Loki...he told Thor everything before we left." Phil finished.

"We can trust him?" demanded Clint Barton.

"In this." confirmed Phil.

Steve Rogers nodded.

"He...warned us...at the end. In Russia."

Steve turned his gaze back to Phil.

"Tell us what you can."

Phil swallowed.

"He's a plague. He invades planets. He takes what he wants."

Phil began to pace, meeting each Avenger and Agent’s eyes in turn.

"He’s the head of some Malthusian cult. He wipes out half the population of worlds and takes hostages to prevent others from following."

Phil looked at Clint.
“He sent Loki.”

Clint and Natasha’s fists clenched. Phil turned to Tony.

”The attack on New York. That's him.”

Tony nodded grimly.

”So this is it.”

”What's our timeline?” Steve asked.

Phil shook his head.

“No telling. Although he must be close, given Dr. Banner here. And myself.”

He looked at Strange and Wong.

”Loki confirmed he has the Power and Space Stones.”

Strange, Wong and Randolph cursed.

”That already makes him the strongest creature in the whole Universe.” groaned Randolph. “If he gets his hands on all six Stones...”

“He can destroy life on a scale hither to undreamt of.” concluded Strange.

Lance’s head swiveled, and he considered Strange.

“Did you seriously just say "hither to undreamt of"? he demanded.

Mack reached out and hit Hunter across his head. Yo-Yo glared at them.

”Good point...” mused Tony.

Strange’s Cloak floated over and smacked Tony.

Rubbing his forehead, Tony glared at the Cloak for several minutes.

“Is it...glaring back?” whispered Phil.

May rolled her eyes.

Finally, Tony looked away.

“I'm going to allow that.” he announced.

Wong snickered.

”Look, this Thanos needs all six.” observed Yo-Yo. “Why don't we just destroy this one? Daisy quakes it apart, and...”

Strange shook his head.

“No can do.”

Wong continued, “We swore an oath to protect the Time Stone with our lives.”
Tony rolled his eyes.

“And I swore off dairy, but then, Ben & Jerry’s named a flavor after me, so...”

“Stark Raving Hazelnuts.” Strange noted.

Tony shrugged.

“It's not bad.”

Daisy wrinkled her nose.

“A bit chalky.” she added. Tony glared at her.

“'A Hunka-Hulka Burning Fudge' is our favourite.” offered Wong.

Bruce stared at him.

“That's a thing?” he asked.

Phil decided to retake charge of the meeting.

“The point is,” he interjected, “things change.”

Strange glared at him.

“Our oath to protect the Time Stone cannot change. This Stone may be the best chance we have against Thanos.”

Tony shook his head.

“And still conversely, it may also be his best chance against us!” he argued.

“Well, if we don't do our jobs.” sniped Strange.

Tony leaned back.

“You know, I never did ask. What is your job exactly, besides making balloon animals?

Strange froze him with a look.

“Protecting your reality, douche bag.”

“Gentlemen, language...” scolded Steve.

“Seriously?” snorted Hunter.

“Besides, your Vision is out there with the Mind Stone.” noted Wong. “Perhaps it could be des...”

“Not an option.” growled Natasha. Tony and Steve immediately nodded.

As the room began to devolve into bickering, May stood up.

“Enough!”

The room immediately quieted. Phil grinned.
“The fact is that we have the time stone.” May continued. “We know where it is. But Vision is out there somewhere with the Mind Stone, and we have to find him now.”

Mack nodded grimly.

”Before this Thanos does.” he said.

”There is...another.” Phil added. “If we are to gain control over the Stones before Thanos does, then I know the location of a third. The Soul Stone.”

Randolph frowned.

”How?” demanded Wong. “The Soul Stone has been lost for eons!”

”On my extraction team was a remarkable lady named Gamora. The adopted daughter of Thanos. She was ordered to find the stone, but once she had, she ran instead. Destroyed all maps of its location.”

“But she told you.” finished Strange. “Why, Agent Coulson?”

Phil rubbed the back of his neck. He moved slightly away from May.

”Because the Soul Stone may be the only thing that can save me.”

---

**S H I E L D** Playground ruins

2017

Phil Coulson swallowed hard.

“I need the Rider.”

Robbie Reyes stared at him in horror.

“You are out of your fucking mind, Coulson.”

”Yeah, I’ve heard that a lot. Got the blue soap to prove it. Smells like peppermint.”

”Soap? I...err...No!”

* I agree. We made a deal, Robbie Reyes.

Phil looked at him keenly.

“You can talk to him, can’t you?”

At Robbie’s sharp nod, Phil continued, “Let me talk to him? Please?”

Robbie said nothing. He bowed his head.

Phil tried again.

”Robbie, we are running out of time. Neither one of us can defeat AIDA separately. The hole between the universes is only growing. And if she leaves with the Darkhold, it will be the end of everything. Evil will win here.”
Phil turned away. He had to reach him.

"I took an oath. To serve when everything else fails. To be humanity’s last line of defence. To be..."

_The Shield._

Phil turned back around. The flaming skeletal face studied him. The glowing eyes seemed to penetrate into Phil’s soul.

_You are interesting, Director Coulson._

"Just Agent..."

_That’s not what you are in your heart. The last true oath keeper. But also the one who needs to be in charge. Making the decisions. Pulling the strings._

"Because no one is better at it than I. No one has SHIELD’s best interests more at heart."

_Director Fury’s legacy. To rebuild SHIELD. The right way. Tell me, Director Coulson, standing here, your base in ashes, your legacy unknown or destroyed, did you succeed?_

"I made mistakes. But I believe SHIELD can rise again. Must rise again.” He looked at the being. "There's an idea, a symbol that must continue no matter what.”

_Even without you?_

There was a deathly silence.

_How do I know that this is not another mistake?_

"Trust me?”

_Robbie Reyes does. He barely knows you, but he does._

It considered Phil for a moment.

_Take my hand, Director._

Without hesitation, Phil put his hand in the Rider’s. A wave of agony swept through him, and only the Rider’s hand held him up. Fire, ice engulfed him as his best and worst decisions played out in front of him.

It lasted forever. It took no time at all.

The Rider let go of his hand. Phil fell to his knees in front of him.

_What do you want?_

“To stop AIDA. Save the world.”

_What do YOU want?_

“To save my team. Save Daisy. Save Melinda. The rest.”

_Not yourself?_
“I would gladly trade my life for theirs.”

I believe you.

A heartbeat.

_Understand what you are asking, Phil Coulson. My Aspect cannot be put on and taken off like a coat. Also, I have a deal with Robbie Reyes. He is an ideal host - young, strong, smart. I do not wish to give this up. It would mean his death._

_If I enter you, even temporarily, we are bound. There will always be a piece of your soul that is mine. You would always be a Rider._

_But there can only be one Rider in every dimension. You and Reyes...only one of you can survive in the end. And, as I said, I have made my deal._

_I can give you this. At the end of our time, Robbie can take the Darkhold to another dimension. We do not intend to use it, just to make sure no one else ever does. Call it my payment. We can remain there for a time. But, eventually, we must return to this Earth._

“And Robbie must collect me.”

_Kill you, Coulson. You are...shielded...from that sort of interference._

“How long?”

_No way of knowing. It may be a few hours. You may live out the rest of your life._

Phil got to his feet.

“I accept.”

_Then let us begin._

Present Day

“You did WHAT??”

“That was how...”

"Dios, Coulson..."

"You should’ve called...”

"You....”

May turned to Phil.

"I didn’t hit you nearly as hard as I should’ve.” she growled.

Maria Hill held up her hands.

"Everyone. Phil had his reasons. Granted, they were stupid-ass, and he should’ve come to us...but he didn’t.”
There was no time. Not even to get Tony.” Phil stood his ground. “It was either the Rider, or losing another member of my team to AIDA and Ivanov. Probably Simmons. Or Fitz.”

His Agents scowled, but grudgingly nodded. May glared at him.

“What’s done is done.” Maria continued. “Let’s focus on getting these Stones.”

Steve sighed.

“Nat, Sam and I will head off to England to pick up Wanda, Vision and Fitsimmons.”

“Bring them back to Wakanda.” offered T’Challa. “We may be able to find a solution for your friend here.”

“I need to return to the Sanctum.” Strange noted. “I’ll need to prepare for Thanos and ward the Sanctuary.”

Wong nodded in agreement.

“Ok, we’ll need people to guard Strange.” Tony grinned. “I don’t mind staying at home.”

Bruce thought for a moment.

“Probably easier if I stayed in New York too.”

“Bobbi, Hunter, can you liaise with...whoever... in government? Let them know what’s coming?” Phil asked. “I’d be more of a distraction at this point, and we don’t have time to bring me up to speed.”

“Got it, Director.”

“The rest of my Agents, Barton, you too, if you’d like, head to New York as well to help Tony.”

“We’re all pardoned,” confirmed Mack. “We can work in the open again.”

“Except Clint.” Maria shook her head. “We’ll figure it out.”

Daisy’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“What are you planning to do, DC?”

“I’m going after the Soul Stone.”

Phil allowed the protest that emerged, then held up his hands for quiet. Amazingly, he got it.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done to get me back. But I can’t risk any of you on this. Gamora was only able to find where the Stone was. Not anything else about it. And if she is captured by Thanos, it’s only a matter of time.”

Phil hung his head briefly.

“This has to be on me. I’m the only one who can fix this. And it’s my life on the line.”

“I’m going with you.”

Phil stared at May.
"You said yourself, Coulson, Earth science, us ground soldiers, this isn’t our fight. If you really have to do this, then I go to watch your back."

Phil sighed.

"I’m not going to win this, am I?"

May simply glared at him.

"All right."

"I don’t like this.” objected Steve.

"Then it’s a good thing that I’m the Director.” Phil said mildly.

"It’s going to take us until tomorrow to prepare.” noted Daisy. “Strange, will you...”

"Act like your personal portal servant? Again?” Strange commented caustically.

His cloak rose, and Strange patted it down onto his shoulders.

"I know...” he sighed. “Be ready in the morning, Agents.”

Wong lifted an eyebrow at Phil.

"How were you planning on getting to..."

"Vormir? Uh...I was hoping for a ride?"

Wong nodded.

"I can do that. Same time tomorrow?"

“Can we wait?” asked May.

Phil though for a moment, then nodded.

"Gamora and the rest were headed off to get the Reality Stone. We probably have tonight. After that...”

"The End can come at any moment.” Tony nodded. “Well, then, let’s be off. I’m sure Pepper’s going to love hearing about this. Bruce, you wanna...”

"Nope... I’m not getting involved in this one...”

"Awww...Brucie....”

As the various members separated and began moving towards their destinations, Randolph took Phil aside.

"The Soul Stone. Coulson, what did Thor tell you about it?"

“Not much. Why?”

The Asgardian shook his head. “There’s something about it...it’s at the back of my mind. Something important. Part of our lore.”
Phil shook his head.

Randolph sighed.

"Ok, I’ll go back with Strange. Try to tease it out of my memory tonight."

"Don’t take too long..." Coulson chuckled.

He turned and saw Steve and Nat’s images flicker.

"Be careful, Director," said Steve. “We only just got you back.”

"Thank you Captain. You too."

Natasha regarded him.

"Good hunting, Phil."

"And to you, Nat."

The image flickered, and was gone.

Phil paused in front of the doorway. Everyone had withdrawn, either back to their cities, or to bed down for the night.

It had been a long, long day, begun hours ago on the Milano, and he was physically, mentally and emotionally worn out.

And there would be more to come just like it. At least he would be facing what ever came with his friends.

All of them.

The door opened.

May and Coulson looked at each other. He held up a bottle. May shook her head.

"I never needed the Haig, Phil. Just you."

He smiled ruefully.

"It only took us to the end of the world."

May stood aside, and jerked her head towards the doorway.

Phil entered.

The door closed behind them.

Chapter End Notes

All right, so if you want to know more about Phil's Deal, check out Chapter 34 of the Tie that Binds. I will reiterate that the nature of the Deal is such that it will happen too
quickly for anyone to interfere, so, no, Quake or Tony can't fight Robbie off for Phil. Because they would.

Great liberties were taken with the Infinity War dialogue here, as the original lines got moved around a bit with the addition of...well..everyone. Hopefully not too jarring. Plus Bruce never fought Thanos in this AU - I wonder how that will affect the Hulk?

And I also wonder what Elliot Randolph has forgotten about the Soul Stone. *Scratches head.* Huh. Probably not important...

Next up...most days, when the world changes, start out normally. The calm before the Infinity War storm.
Chapter Summary

Do you remember where you were the morning before the world changed?

A peek into the lives of some of our heroes at the start of the day that Thanos' Black Order attacked Earth.

Chapter Notes

Title comes from Jesus Christ Superstar's "Gethsemane"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NYC
Queens

"Peter! Breakfast!"

May Parker watched in amusement as Peter bounded down the hall, slid into his seat, and began to cram his cereal down like there was no tomorrow.

"Woah! Slow down there...What's got you in a rush?"

"Gonna meet up with Ned, go over English.." Peter mumbled around his breakfast.

"And?"

"That's it."

"Peter..."

"All right. We were going to test out some mods I made on the suit."

May sighed.

"We've been over this before, Peter. I only want you doing that sort of thing under Mr. Stark's supervision."

Such as it was...she thought.

Peter scowled.

"All we want to do is test it, Aunt May."
"Yes, and whenever you do, Birdman shows up or Lizardbreath, or whoever the next bad guy of the week is. Coincidence or not, I DON'T want you doing this alone, Peter."

"I'm not, I've got Ned."

"Oh really. And what happened to Ned at that concert, Peter?"

Peter looked uncomfortable.

"He just got a little chilled, Aunt May."

"You two were lucky. That frozen madman was seconds away from killing him."

"I told him to go home!"

May sighed. She wasn't going to win this argument.

"Look...I know I agreed to you working with Mr. Stark. But I came close to losing you. I don't think I could stand it if anything were to happen to you."

Peter walked over and gave his aunt a hug.

"I have to do this. You know why."

They stood for a moment in silence, then Peter sighed.

"I'll take it with me to school. Then Ned and I will go see Mr. Stark afterwards, test it in his labs. OK?"

"No...but better."

Peter scooped up his backpack.

"Here." May picked up a piece of paper off the fridge. "I signed the field trip form."

"Thanks!"

Peter kissed his Aunt on the forehead.

"Meatloaf for dinner. Invite Mr. Stark."

Peter laughed.

"I will. Love you!"

"Love you too!" May called after him.

As Peter slammed the door behind him, May looked at the table and groaned.

Peter had forgotten to clear his place. Again.

Teenage boys...she thought to herself, and began to tidy the kitchen.
Phil Coulson slowly opened his eyes, and stretched out in bed. He breathed in, and smiled. Finally, non-recycled air. Air on the ships always had a chemical whiff to it. Now, it just was cotton, something citrusy, and...

He turned over quietly. Melinda May didn't even look in his direction, going through her Tai Chi routine. He watched her, powerful grace flowing through each of the positions. To anyone one else, she would seem oblivious to the world around her, but a flicker of her eyelids towards the bed betrayed her.

She finished up and moved back over to him.

"Morning..."

She smirked.

"Like what you see?" she teased, sitting back down beside him.

"Mel, you are the best thing I've woken up to in months." Phil pretended to consider. "Make that years."

He gently tugged her back down on the bed, and kissed her gently, enjoying finally being with her.

When they pulled apart, a little breathless, he repeated, "Morning..."

"I nearly woke you up," Melinda confessed. "But it looked like you needed the sleep."

"Yeah, I'm feeling better than I have in a long time. But I'm not sure it was because of the sleep..."

Melinda laughed, a rare sound, and settled back into his arms.

"I wish we had more time." Phil finally said. "After this...Thanos...once we've dealt with the Rider...a break would be nice."

"We haven't had one in 5 years. Just time spent getting over injuries, going from one crisis to the next." Melinda looked at him. "Well, you at least. I had Hawaii and..."

"And I'd never begrudge you that. Andrew Garner was a lucky man."

Melinda nodded.

"I've always wanted to go to Ireland." Phil mused. "But it's a little dark and murky..."

A stroke of inspiration hit him.

"May? Want to go to Tahiti with me? Once this is over? Somewhere warm, white sand, secluded beaches?"

He lifted himself up on one elbow and grinned.
"I've always wanted to go parasailing..."

Melinda snorted.

"After all we've been through, all the freefalls, death-defying leaps, fights, chases, EVERYTHING....and you want to go parasailing?"

"Closest thing to flying...please, Melinda? Run away with me to Tahiti? Even if it's only for a week?"

"You think we'd be able to last a week?" Melinda asked.

"No, there'll always be something. But we can try..." sighed Phil.

Melinda stilled, then smiled.

"Then yes. After we deal with all this, I'll come with you."

"I like the sound of that..."

She turned her face up for another kiss, and they forgot everything for a while.

The Milano

Gamora looked over at her Terran love. She was not looking forward to this conversation, but Knowhere was getting closer. And she had put it off long enough.

"I need to ask a favor." she began.

Peter Quill continued to check through his weapons.

"Yeah. Sure..." he muttered absentmindedly.

Gamora sighed.

"One way or another, the path that we're on leads to Thanos."

Quill looked up at her and grinned.

"Which is what the grenades are for!"

Gamora scowled at him, and Quill seemed to realize that she was serious. He walked across the cabin, and took her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "What's the favor?"

Gamora swallowed, but looked deep into his eyes.

"If things go wrong...if Thanos gets me...I want you to promise me you'll kill me."

Quill drew apart from her and frowned.
"What?" he asked in disbelief.

"I know something he doesn't." she persisted. "If he finds it out, the entire universe could be at risk."

"What do you know?"

Gamora shook her head.

"If I tell you, you'd know, too."

Quill raised an eyebrow.

"If it's so important, shouldn't I?"

"Only if you want to die."

Quill rolled his eyes.

"Why does somebody always have to die in this scenario?"

"Just trust me. And possibly, kill me."

Quill drew her closer.

"I mean, I'd like to. I really would..."

Gamora tilted his face up and looked into his eyes again.

"Swear to me. Swear to me on your mother."

Quill sighed.

"Okay. Okay..."

Gamora smiled sadly, and pulled him in for a kiss. He returned it, pulling her closer still. She knew that, in the end, she could...

CRUNCH

...Trust...

CRUNCH CRUNCH

...Him...

CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH

They pulled apart and glared at Drax, who was munching on something.

"Dude!" Quill exclaimed. "How long have you been standing there?"
Drax swallowed his snack.

"An hour."

"Are you serious?" Gamora chuckled.

Drax nodded.

"I've mastered the ability of standing so incredibly still that I become invisible to the eye. Watch."

He slowly raised a nut to his mouth.

Gamora rubbed her head, while Quill laughed.

"You're eating a zarqnut."

Slowly chewing, Drax responded, "But my movement is so slow that it's imperceptible."

Gamora and Quill glanced at each other, trying not to laugh.

"No." they said.

Drax pouted.

"I'm sure I'm invisible."

Mantis entered the room, her bright eyes taking in everything. They landed on Drax.

"Hi, Drax!" she chirped.

Drax flung himself into a seat.

"Dammit."

_____________________________________________________________

New Avengers Mansion

The remaining Agents were getting ready to head into NYC. Maria Hill had told Phil she would be heading in too, something about their ‘Ace in the Hole’.

Phil peered into the ceiling railings. He was afraid he knew who Maria meant. And only Fury had the means to contact her.

It had been around 20 years. Would she still even have her pager?

But that was not his worry. There was one other person he needed to find before Wong and Strange came for them. He couldn't leave without having this conversation with him.

"Barton? Clint?"

He sighed. Clint wasn't making this easy on him.
"I know you're up there..."

"Actually, he isn't."

Phil turned around. Laura Barton stood there, her eyes sparkling, sipping on her cup of coffee.

"He's inside, getting the kids dressed."

"Laura..."

Phil strode over to her, kissed her cheek, and gave her a hug.

"It's good to see you."

"And you too, Phil." She considered him. "You look pretty good for a dead man."

Phil nodded, accepting it.

"I'm sorry, Laura..."

She held up her hand.

"Not me you need to apologize to. Well, actually, yes, you do. And Cooper. He cried for days when he heard the news."

Phil winced.

"But Clint, yeah. You need to talk to him first."

"Who needs to..." Clint came around the corner and stopped.

"Ah."

Phil just waited.

"Kids are ready...you wanna..."

"I'll get breakfast into them."

Laura gave Clint a quick kiss, and Phil a warning look. She turned, and went back through the door, closing it firmly behind her.

"Your family?"

"Tony moved them here, once we all got back together. I hadn't seen them since The Raft."

Clint nodded at the door.

"Got a nice set of rooms for us. Not quite the farm we set up, but at least we're together."

"I'm glad Clint."
The two men stood awkwardly for a bit, then Clint sighed.

"Want to take this outside, Coulson?"

Phil nodded, and the two moved out into the bright morning sunlight.

Phil settled down on a bench, enjoying the crisp mountain air. Clint swung himself up into a nearby tree, his eyes on his former boss.

"What are you going to be doing?" Coulson started.

Clint shrugged.

"They haven't pardoned Cap's team yet, although Tony says they're working on it. So with Hill gone, I'll be staying behind, monitoring the coms."

"I'm sorry, that can't be..."

"Screw it, Coulson. That's not what you came to talk about."

"No, and I'm stalling."

Phil closed his eyes, and leaned back against the bench.

"What do you know about what happened to me?"

Clint shrugged.

"We were briefed on Project TAHITI by Hill and May, when your agents came back. Short form, they pumped you full of alien juice, you went insane, they wiped your mind, and you slowly went insane. Then you found the Temple of Doom and got better."

"Close enough."

Phil met Clint's eyes.

"I didn't know. Not at first. I was ordered not to contact you, Fury said the Avengers still needed time to come together, and my...resurrection...would only get in the way of that."

Clint scoffed, and Phil held up a hand.

"Remember, when I went up against Loki, Steve and Tony were at each other's throats, and Bruce was barely holding on. I figured you and Nat had your hands full behind the scenes, and I didn't want to mess up your op."

Phil swallowed.

"Found out later, once May had...unearthed...everything, that the doctors were afraid of a relapse. That I had such strong emotions considering everyone on the Avengers, that it might counteract the mindwipe. They figured that later, once it had taken hold, maybe I could work with you again."

"But then HYDRA."
Clint grimaced.

"And everyone was on the run. Dealing with Ward, and Garrett. Then Fury named me Director...and then the carvings. Maybe I should've reached out then. But I thought the carvings...something had taken me over, inside me, controlling me. I couldn't be trusted. Not until we figured this out."

Phil paused, remembering.

“So I activated the Theta Protocol, built the Helicarrier. But then the Inhumans began to appear. Starting with Daisy. So I pushed off contacting you, I figured as soon as I got Daisy settled...which still hasn't happened. Not really.”

Phil leaned forward.

"I was always looking out for you and the rest. I got the intel on Loki’s staff. Got Maria to send you in."

"Why didn't you come with it?"

“They didn't tell you about Gonzales' takeover?"

"Right, yes, they did. Bobbi and I had words about that."

"It's OK, it's all forgiven. But I guess that's the pattern. I'd solve one problem, only to have one or two more come up in its place. And I kept pushing calling you back and back. Told myself that SHIELD was best working in the shadows, that the Avengers didn't need to be associated with a terrorist group. Once we could come home, then maybe."

Phil’s gaze grew darker.

“And then those damned Accords...and it was too late. I was supposed to be hunting you. We were legit...and you were the terrorists. And I was being watched...I had just resigned as Director, and already suspect because of Daisy. The only way I could keep you all safe...was not to look."

He put his head in his hands.

"The funny thing is, I probably created more problems than I solved, keeping us all apart. Cap and Tony could've taken care of Jaying and Cal. Bruce could've worked with Fitzsimmons and counteracted Terragenesis before it became too late. You, or Nat, would've put Ward, and probably Malick, six feet under, long before I did. And all of you could've blown AIDA and Ivanov into bits. But I didn't ask."

Clint shifted in the tree, but said nothing.

"I wondered what would happen if I did make contact. But you all had moved on with your lives. And you all seemed happy, from everything I heard. And I didn't want to face that rejection. I've always held each of you in the highest of respect. I didn't want to lose that."

"I never meant to hurt any of you, Clint. And I know I did. All I can say is I'm sorry."

"We needed you, Phil." Clint said softly. "It might have looked it from the outside, but we never really gelled. It was always a battle for control, and all of us...we never really recovered from Loki."
All it took was one little tap...and we came apart."

Clint flipped off the tree, and sat on the bench beside Phil. He carefully put a hand on his shoulder.

"I think I understand, Coulson. But the Avengers still need you. SHIELD still needs you. It's what you tried to teach me when you brought me in. You can't do everything by yourself. You need a team to trust."

"Half of them were Nazis, Clint."

"Meh...the theory is still sound. Look, what did Fury ask you to do?"

"Build SHIELD back up. The right way."

"A task that took Carter and Stark...senior...a lifetime to do. And you nearly brought it back in 5 years? I'd say that was superhuman in itself."

Clint stood up.

"I forgive you. Doesn't mean I'm not going to watch when you and Nat have this discussion. But you're still handler of Strike Team Delta. I'll follow you anywhere. Once I'm pardoned, of course."

"Thank you."

Clint smirked.

"Of course, you have about five years of penance to pay..."

Phil groaned.

"What did you have in mind..."

The two men got up and started back in the complex.

"Oh, just becoming head of the Avengers..."

"Oh, dear God...."

CODA

Vormir

He watched over his charge, the orange gem spinning serenely in between the dimensions.

It was almost time. He would soon be able to pass his burden to someone else. Perhaps he had learned better, all these long, lonely years. Maybe that was not for him to judge. He supposed he'd learn soon enough.

Only a mad being would even attempt to possess the Soul Stone. Unfortunately, he knew from experience that there were far too many of those in existence in this Universe.

There were two ways to gain control of the gem. But the type of being who would come after it
would never, could never, take the second path. He certainly wouldn’t have. A puzzlement, to be sure.

He drew his cloak tighter around him and kept watch.

And waited.

Chapter End Notes

Hi...one last pit stop before we hit Infinity War. And maybe this was a little Phil-heavy...but once he made up his mind to do something, who was I to stop him?

When connecting up the movies and Agents of SHIELD, it is very difficult to come up with the answer as to why Coulson never contacted any of the Avengers past the Battle of Sokavia. Members of the Avengers could have assisted with many of the plot points in Seasons 2-5. And, as we saw in The Tie that Binds, there were many points where Coulson could have popped up on the MCU radar, if they had been looking. This is a first stab as to what Phil might have been thinking. He might get the chance to clarify points later. Or perhaps not...

The majority of this chapter was written prior to the announcements made at the 2018 San Diego Comic Con. For anyone wondering, those announcements, especially those about the mortal status of Phil Coulson, do not tie into this story. (Our Coulson has his own problems...) The author doesn't have enough character space to discuss how they truly and sincerely feel about those events. (Hint: :P :P :P #CoulsonLives.)

Next up...get ready for an invasion of the worst kind...
In Washington, New York and at the New Avengers Mansion (location [REDACTED]), our heroes are setting up for the impending arrival of Thanos (or his Black Order).

Unfortunately, the last remnants of HYDRA are also putting their plans in motion.

The two don't mix.

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Washington, D.C.

“Tell me why we didn’t drag the Senator out of bed last night?” asked Lance Hunter, as they passed throughout the second security checkpoint.

“We checked the feeds. Not at home, not in the office.” Bobbi Morse replied, accepting her service weapon back and safely holstering it.

“That’s because he was in with the President and the Secretary of State, arguing why all of you shouldn’t be rounded up for questioning.”

Agent Piper yawned as she met them, and held out the coffee to her teammates.

The three of them hurried down towards the hallway.

“There’s a Situation we need everyone in on.” Piper muttered quietly.

Bobbi and Hunter glanced at each other.

“Hate to tell you this, Pipes, but we’re not here on a social call.” responded Hunter just as quietly. “We have a SITUATION.”

“Seriously?” groaned Piper. “Not a good time…”

“When is it ever?” agreed Bobbi.

As they paused in front of the door, Piper asked, “How is he?”

“Coulson’s fine. A little tired, but alive.” Bobbi responded.

“We sprung everything on him last night.” chuckled Hunter. “Almost made him speechless. Almost…. He said to say ‘hi’ and that you did a damn good job with Strange.”

Piper beamed momentarily, then sobered, and opened the door.

The holo-conference was in session. Senator Jason Thompson, head of the Office of Enhanced and
Extra-Terrestrial Beings looked like hell, clutching an extra large coffee mug. He glared at both images equally, as he waved the three to come around the table.

"...and why the fuck are Inhumans still at the top of your hit list?" complained Vijay Nadeer, chair of the SI Foundation’s One World, One People Initiative, and de facto head of the Inhumans in the United States.


"But no vibranium!"

"That we know of..."

“Both of you, shut up!” roared Senator Thompson. “You’ve had the same argument three times this morning.”

He turned to the Agents.

"I hope, for everyone’s sake, you can prove where your lot were for the past several days.”

"We didn’t do it.” responded Hunter automatically. “Now, what didn’t we do?"

Bobbi sighed, but resisted smacking Hunter.

“Thaddeus Ross was found murdered in his cell on The Raft four days ago.” Talbot said.

"Oh, shit.” Hunter responded.

Thompson took his seat.

"They’ve been keeping it under wraps, it just came to light.” He shook his head. “They were hoping a missing guard was the answer, but no. His throat was slit with something circular, and traces of vibranium were found in the wound.”

"Circular...vibranium?” mused Bobbi. “You think Steve did this?”

"Rogers' shield fits the description.” agreed Talbot. “And he’s gotten on and off of the Raft undetected twice before. And he hated Ross.”

"Not enough to kill him!” objected Piper.

"We’ve got it under wraps for the moment, but we’re going to have to release it soon.”

"Before Humans First steps in and starts making wild accusations.” spat Vijay.

"Since vibranium is involved, we’re going to have to notify the Wakandans.” sighed Thompson. “Maybe they have an idea or two...”

Bobbi finished up her coffee.

"Look, our team didn’t do this, you know that.” she said. “ And the Wakandans are going to be a bit busy to help. We’ve all got much bigger problems to worry about.”

Hunter nodded grimly.

"Coulson back?” asked Talbot. “Then it’s probably an ‘end of the world’ type problem, isn’t it?”
"'End of the Universe’, actually.” responded Hunter.

"Same old Coulson...” Talbot sighed.

New Avengers Mansion

"I would like to be back in New York before Thanos gets there...” snapped Stephen Strange.

"Got it!”

Maria Hill clapped Phil Coulson on his shoulder, and grinned at Melinda May.

"To boldly go, and all that...” she quipped, moving towards Strange.

Coulson chuckled, and watched as Mack and Yo-Yo took their places beside her. He smiled a goodbye at them, and they waved in response.

Daisy came up to them, hugging May quickly.

May looked up and saw Clint Barton entering the room, a frown upon his face. She moved towards him, leaving Daisy and Phil alone.

Daisy smiled half-heartedy.

“So we’re all off again.” She rubbed at her face. “Thought we’d have more time.”

“The life of a SHIELD Agent, you should know that by now. Besides, I know you’ll do a great job leading them in New York. Whoever Thanos sends won’t stand a chance.”

They hugged tightly.

"I am so proud of you, daughter of my heart.” Phil whispered.

"I love you....” Daisy snuffled.

"Love you too...”

They pulled away, and all eyes turned to May and Clint.

"Rhodes called.” Clint said. “Trouble at the Tower.”

"Someone actually managed to hack into SI servers, used them to access the Registered Inhuman database.” continued May.

"They downloaded it, then wiped it from the EETB computers.”

“The what?” asked Phil.

May ignored him and continued.

"They need Daisy to look things over...Tony’s getting things in place at Strange’s Sanctuary. Something about protections and wards...”

"So we go there until ET on steroids shows up.” finished Mack.

"All right.” agreed Daisy.
Strange opened the portal, making Phil shudder. Maria, Daisy, Yo-Yo and Mack filed through it. It winked out behind them.

Phil looked up at Clint, who had raised an eyebrow.

"A portal can open both ways..." he explained.

Clint grimaced in understanding.

Wong walked over to Phil and May. He offered what looked to be like two clicker pens.

"I can’t stay with you.” He said. “I need to be at Strange’s side for this...no offense to your Agents.”

“None taken.” said Phil.

"After you have the stone, activate the clicker as soon as you can. I will come get you as soon as I can.”

"And if you can’t?” asked May.

"Then we’re in a hell of a lot of trouble, Agent May.” Wong finished. “Shall we?”

May and Coulson looked at each other.

"Let’s get this over with.” said Phil.

Clint watched as Wong created his portal. The three of them walked through, and it closed behind them.

Clint had a very, very bad feeling about this.

He headed back to the com centre.

---

D.C.

Senator Thompson was on the phone.

"Yes, I need the President, Senator Gregg, and both Leaders of the House and Senate to my office. Now would be good. Yes, I do happen to know what time they went to bed last night. Try the level above critical. Try DEFCON....”

"One.” supplied Talbot.

"Thank you, One. Well...would you mind asking Mr. President if an imminent alien attack, bigger than the one five years ago, is worth his time?’”

Thompson paused.

"Thank you, Mr. Chief of Staff.”

He slammed the phone down.

"We’ll probably get Clark in first. He’s got the clout to wake up the rest.”

"There’s not much we can do, Senator Thompson.” Bobbi said. “We don’t know how much time we
"This Thanos, he takes entire planets out," continued Hunter. "He could probably eat Earth for lunch..."

"So, what?" demanded Talbot. "We just sit back and watch?"

Bobbi glared at him.

"No, our hope is going to be in getting these gems before Thanos. One is in New York..."

"Not again..." groaned Thompson.

"One is in the UK...we’re picking it up, taking it to Wakanda."

"Good, it's T’Challa’s problem..." muttered the Senator.

Piper rolled her eyes.

"And we have our best Agents going after a third."

"Let me guess...Coulson and May." said Talbot. "Well, that one will go sideways, but Phil will bring it home, causing as much destruction and chaos as he can along the way."

Hunter snickered.

"It would help..." Bobbi glared at her partner, “if we could round up the Registered Inhumans who could fight, get them to Wakanda for the stand."

Vijay rubbed his neck, and glared at Thompson.

"There’s a secondary problem, Agent Morse." Vijay said. "It seems as if last night, while you were all arguing about Ross and which Inhuman to hang for it, someone downloaded, then wiped the Registered Inhuman list."

"We don’t know where any of them are..." confirmed Thompson.

"The intrusion came from a Stark server." Talbot started. "Like the ones in your offices, Mr. Nadeer. You’ve been dead set against Registration..."

"It wasn’t us! Which means an address list could be in the possession of the Watchdogs. Again."

"It wasn’t Tony." offered Hunter.

"Do you have anyone available, Vijay?"

"I’ll look...but they’re mostly children. They can’t go into combat."

"Not even for the end of the..."

"Children, Talbot!"

“No, Vijay’s right. Children do not belong in a war.” agreed Thompson. “There are other enhanced groups though. Trudeau’s Alpha Flight. Excalibur in Britain. I’m sure there are others elsewhere. We can put out the call, see if we can get to them in time.”
"Pick up the phone, Senator." said Piper. “Time is the one thing we don’t have.”

New York City

Stark Tower

Colonel James Rhodes was stumped.

While Tony was the computer genius, he also went to MIT. He knew how to figure out a hacking job. And there just were no signs of it. No external access.

Nobody was that good. Not even Tony. Maybe that Inhuman…but he didn’t seem the type...

How’d the hell did SI get compromised?

"James?"

“Yeah, FRIDAY?”

“There’s an urgent e-mail that has come into Mr. Stark’s inbox. Given everything that has gone on, I calculate a 95% rate that it will apply to our situation.”

Rhodes sighed.

"Well, then bring it up, FRIDAY."

“Transferring now."

The email came up on his screen, and he turned himself around to read it. It took him twice through before he realized that Bryan wasn’t joking.

But it didn’t make any sense. Why would they say...

And then, a horrifying realization hit him, and he stood up, staring at the e-mail.

If it was true, then it was the missing piece. SI wasn’t hacked from the outside.

It was an internal job. And there were only two people with that level of access...

"I’m sorry, James. But I must comply."

Rhodey heard the trigger click, then his world turned black, and he knew nothing more.

“FRIDAY, abort alarm, Sigma Delta Zulu 9176546.”

“Body scan confirmed. Alarm aborted.”

“Delete e-mail from servers, wipe all 11th floor cameras for 1 hour time frame, past and present on my mark. And...mark.”

“Affirmative.”

10 floors down, a portal winked closed, and Daisy, Mack and Yo-Yo strode across the lobby.

A stern faced woman in a military uniform met them, and waved them quickly through security.
“Agents Johnson, Mackenzie, Rodriguez?”

They nodded. She smiled.

“Good to finally meet you. I'm Brigadier General Katherine Hale, US Air Force, sent to liaise about the impending alien invasion.”

She motioned them to the elevator.

“We've been waiting for you.”

CODA

Si Asia servers

From: Bryan_Chen@SI_Finance.sg
To: IMBoss@SI_Home.org
Subject: Re: Thank you for sending my fiancee home! Loyalty shall be rewarded...
Flag: URGENT

Mr. Stark,

We have reviewed your e-mail below as to our recent work with Ms. Potts and her extended stay at the SI offices here in Singapore.

While we are grateful for the offer for the 25% raise for all the...remaining...staff at SI Asia, my loyalty to you and SI compels me to respond honestly.

We have just completed our mandated audit. There was no evidence of any internal...shenanigans...as you put it.

There have been no mass firings here at SI Asia, discreet or otherwise.

We haven't seen Ms. Virginia Potts in these offices in 3 years.

We would like to consult with you urgently on this matter, could you please advise as soon as possible?

Sincerely

Bryan Chen
Deputy VP Finance
Stark Industries Asia

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh.

Next up - One set of villains take off....and another set touch down.
Fasten your seat belts, everyone.

(And yes, that is a cameo carried over from The Tie that Binds, he's Secretary of State. All references to real people are made with love and respect.)
Welcome to the Concrete Jungle (Where Dreams Are Made Of)

Chapter Summary

In New York City, evil plots are everywhere. Both Terran and Interstellar. And our heroes are about to walk right into them.

You can never be prepared for everything. As Daisy Johnson, Tony Stark and Bruce Banner are about to find out...

And in the UK, Wanda and Vision have picked a very bad night for a date...

Chapter Notes

Title is also a mashup - Guns & Roses and Alicia Keys. Only on AO3 ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

New York City
Stark Industries Tower

Alphonse "Mack" Mackenzie had to hand it to Tony Stark, his elevators were pretty roomy. He didn't feel as if he was in a sardine can with three other people. He relaxed beside his love, Yo-Yo Rodriguez, who was impatiently watching the numbers on the elevator rise.

"What floor are the servers on again?" asked Daisy Johnson.

"15th, I believe." said General Katherine Hale.

"All right. Yo-Yo, going to need you to keep ears open for Tony. Soon as Thanos shows up, we'll need to drop everything and dash into Greenwich."

"I'm sure Col. Rhodes would give you a lift." observed Hale.

Daisy shrugged.

"Depends on this hacking job. From what I know about Rhodey, he should've been able to find it by now."

The elevator came to a halt on the 11th floor. As the doors opened, Daisy stood a little straighter.

"Ms. Potts! I've heard so much about you, it's nice to finally meet you."

Pepper Potts merely nodded, stepping inside the elevator. She was followed by a younger blond woman, who smiled cheerfully at them.
"Mother."

She took her place beside Daisy, and the doors closed behind them. The elevator resumed its journey upward.

Hale sighed.

"My daughter, Ruby."

The rest of the Agents nodded at the newcomers.

As their gazes drifted up towards the numbers on the elevator, General Hale gave a slight signal.

Daisy heard two shots, and saw Yo-Yo and Mack crumple to the floor. Turning to to meet her attackers, she felt a hard blow to the side of her neck, sending her down beside her friends.

Lifting her hand, she saw, through blurred vision, Virginia Potts aiming the gun in her direction.

Then an impact, and she cursed herself for a fool, falling into the darkness.

The elevator came to a halt on the 15th floor, and Ruby picked up the bag she had left by the doors on that level. As she re-entered the elevator, General Hale pressed the button for the roof, and it ascended again.

"Both of you, put the inhibitors on the Inhumans."

Pepper and Ruby quickly opened the bag, and removed the neck collars, fastening them around the necks of Daisy and Yo-Yo. Ruby grabbed the wrist ties, and secured the three agents.

"Thought you'd like to know, Mother. Ms. Potts left Rhodes alive."

Hale turned to Pepper, lifting an eyebrow.

Expressionless, Pepper returned, "You ordered me to shoot James. I complied. You didn't say with what."

Ruby laughed nastily.

"Still fighting it, Ms. Potts? You'd find that life would be so much simpler if you just stopped thinking and complied."

Pepper's lips tightened, but said nothing.

"It means nothing, Ruby. By the time Col. Rhodes wakes up, we'll be long gone. And, if the Confederacy is right, he'll have much more pressing things to worry about than some missing Agents and Tony's Stark's traitorous fiancee."

Pepper's eyes glistened, but remained silent.

Ruby stalked over to the bodies, and nudged Mack with her foot. She reached back, and removed her vibranium circle blade.
"What about this one, Mother? We don't need him. I say we take him out now, have one less Agent for the new HYDRA regime to deal with."

Hale shook her head.

"Leave him, Ruby. That's an order. He'll be a useful hostage to ensure that the rest comply. I believe that Agents Johnson and Rodriguez will do whatever it takes to keep him alive. We're going to need their help, and the time frame is tight enough."

Ruby scowled, but re-sheathed her blade.

The door opened on the rooftop, and they dragged the bodies out the door. Hale's assistant waited for them.

"Everything is in order, General."

"Thank you. Ms. Potts, please activate the StarkJet."

Pepper slowly turned to the tablet outside the elevator doors. As she punched in her code, the roof floor parted, and Tony's StarkJet rose to rest on the top. The jet door opened, and stairs automatically descended.

"Take them on board, then strap in."

Hale's assistant saluted.

"Where are we going, General?"

Hale smiled evilly.

"To collect the next generation of Inhumans."

She looked into the distance. Her eyes widened.

"And I'd say we don't have very much time. HURRY!"

---

**Sanctum Sanctorum**

Tony got off the phone with a curse.

Dr. Strange raised an eyebrow.

"Don't say it." Stark snapped.

"I take it that was a no?" asked Elliot Randolph.

"Commander James Hudson is currently on patrol around the Arctic Circle. With the rest of Alpha Flight." Tony ground out. "And Justin is not taking my calls."

"Did you expect him to, Stark?" asked Strange, not unsympathetically.
"I didn't expect a Christmas card, not after Cass died...but I did expect him to help when the world was at stake!"

"It could be that something is going on up there?" observed Wong. "The Canadians don't seem to be the type to hold a grudge."

"You've never met a Canucks fan at a Bruins game, have you?" Tony shot back. "Whatever it is...it doesn't matter. They're not going to get back in time."

Tony sighed, and rested against the staircase.

"Are you seriously leaning on the Cauldron of the Cosmos?" Strange demanded.

Tony glanced at it, then shrugged and stood back up.

"Where're the rest of the Agents?" Bruce Banner asked.

"Not sure. Rhodey isn't picking up either. I'm hoping they track down that hack." Stark looked at Strange. "Gotta tell you, Doc, I'm not liking the timing."

"Neither do I. There is too much darkness out there, awaiting an opportunity like this." Strange frowned.

The four were silent, considering the implications.

Tony lifted his head, and squinted at Strange. There was no breeze, and yet...

"Say, Doc, you wouldn't happen to be moving your hair, would you?"

"Not at the moment, no..."

Strange automatically reached up and smoothed his hair back into place. They looked up. Metal scraps began flying past the skylight.

"I'd say it's begun." observed Randolph. "You four go, I'll continue trying to reach the Tower."

"Remind me to talk to Agent about his daughter's sense of timing..." complained Stark, hurrying to the door of the Sanctuary and flinging it open.

Banner, Strange and Wong followed, as a windstorm swept up the street, sending cars crashing into poles, knocking people over.

Bruce and Wong hurried to the upended cars, opening doors, and helping people out into the street.

Tony helped a lady to her feet.

"You okay?"

She nodded, in a daze. As she stumbled away, Tony stared up into the sky.

"FRIDAY, what am I looking at?"
A large circular ship, made of material no man had ever seen before, was descending on New York.

"Not sure, I'm working on it, boss..."

Tony looked back at Strange, his gaze captivated by the ship. His medallion began to glow ominously.

"Hey! You might wanna put that Time Stone in your back pocket, Doc!"

Strange glared back.

"Might wanna use it."

It had been a long field trip, but a break from the ordinary day for most of the students. Peter Parker was impatient for it to end. As soon as school was out, he and Ned were headed over to Mr. Stark’s labs to test out the...

A familiar tingle passed through his body. He lifted his head to see every single hair on his arms stand on end.

This wasn’t good.

Looking out the window, Peter saw a large circular ship float down towards the city.

*No way Mr. Stark wouldn’t see something like that.* Peter thought. *And he was going to need help.*

Aunt May was gonna kill him.

He tapped Ned on the shoulder.

"Psst. Ned, hey. I need you to cause a distraction."

Ned looked out the window. His gaze widened.

“Holy shit!” he screamed. “We’re all gonna die! There’s a spaceship!”

As the other students rushed to the window, Peter gave a quiet sigh. Predictable.

He quickly knocked the window out with his web shooter, and, slipping out, clung to the side of the bus. Slapping his mask on, he took off towards the threat.

The two beings who had descended from the ship were like none Tony had ever seen before. The first was thin, grey, wiry. Tony could almost snap him in half. Yet he surveyed his surroundings as if they were beneath him. The second looked like an extra from *The Lord of the Rings* movie. He scowled at the team confronting them.

Tony wished that Thor had stuck around with Agent, he’d probably know who or what they were.

The wiry one spread his hands wide.

“Hear me, and rejoice. You are about to die at the hands of the Children of Thanos. Be thankful, that your meaningless lives are now contributing to...”

"I'm sorry, Earth is closed today. You better pack it up and get outta here."

He looked Tony up and down, dismissing him, turning to Strange. Tony felt offended.

“Stone keeper... Does this chattering animal speak for you?”

Strange scowled.

"Certainly not. I speak for myself. There's no trespassing in this city and on this planet."

Strange and Wong activated their spells. Even the cloak turned menacing.

"It means, get lost Squidward!” Tony snapped.

The wiry one inclined his head.

“He exhausts me. Bring me the Stone.”

The orc grinned, and started forward.

*Good thing we’ve got one of those. Just in a different colour.* Tony thought. He looked over at Bruce.

“Hey, do you want a piece?”

Bruce sighed.

“No, not really, but when do I ever get what I want?”

Tony turned his attention back on the aliens.

"That's right."

Ebony Maw could feel the surge of raw energy surging through the animal. It was the one who had fled, who had been transported by the Asgardian. He felt the being inside of it attempt to emerge. It could be a match for Cull Obsidian. They couldn’t have that.

He twisted the energy around the human. That should take care of that. For now...

Tony was beginning to get nervous. Had it taken this long before?

“Been a while. Good to have you, buddy.”

Bruce shook his head.

“I just... I need to concentrate here for one second.”

No matter how hard Bruce focused, he couldn’t bring the Hulk up through a...barrier? That wasn’t there before...

“Dude, you're embarrassing me in front of the wizards.” Tony hissed.

Bruce groaned.
"I can't... He won't..."

The other being was almost upon them.

"It's okay. Stand down."

Wong drew Bruce back, frowning.

"I have him."

Tony had just enough time to bring up his suit before he was within its range.

*Where the hell was Quake?* thought Tony, as he fired his first shots.

Central Park was a mess. Again. At least he had Pepper to deal with the Parks Commission this time.

"You plan on helping out?" Tony called over to Bruce.

"Trying...I can't get him out! Something's holding him back!" the scientist yelled back.

As Tony took a blow, sending him through the air, he was caught by a sticky strand of something, safely redirecting him back to the ground.

*Please don't be webbing.* Tony prayed. *Please don't be webbing. Please...*

"What's up, Mr. Stark?" came a cheerful young voice.

*Damn it."

"Kid, where'd you come from?" he asked.

Tony could hear the cocky grin through the Spider-Man suit. That kid was going to be the death of him.

"Field trip."

Peter swung around the alien, narrowly dodging several deadly strokes.

"What is this guy's problem, Mr. Stark?"

Tony groaned. May Parker was going to kill him.

He looked up. The wiry guy had grabbed Strange. And, more importantly, that bloody stone.

"Kid, need you to grab that wizard."

"On it, Mr. Stark."

As Peter chased after Strange, Tony took a breath, then promptly had it crushed from him as the big alien crashed into him.

*Back at it...* he thought, firing his repulsors.

At the end of the battle, Bruce and Wong stood helplessly on the ground as Tony streaked off after the spider kid and Strange. The ship rose out of sight.
"What the hell?" gasped Bruce. "Where were those Agents? And Rhodey?"

Wong shook his head, heading back towards the Sanctuary.

"I don’t know. I can tell you, though, after working with Agent Johnson and the rest, they were not the type not to show up for something like this. Something is very wrong."

He turned towards Bruce.

"I must ward the Sanctums for whatever happens next. And I must keep watch for Agents Coulson and May, for when they get the Soul Gem. We have prepare for the possibility that Thanos may obtain the Time Gem."

And Strange and Tony will be dead. thought Bruce.

"I'll go to the Tower, find out what happened there." he offered.

Wong nodded.

"I'll send Randolph to you. Perhaps the Asgardian can ascertain what happened to the Hulk."

"I hope so..." sighed Bruce.

Bruce burst through the doors of Stark Tower.

"FRIDAY, where’s Rhodey?" he said, tearing through security.

"Col. Rhodes is on Sub Level 3."

"That’s medical!"

"Affirmative."

"Damn it. How about Coulson’s Agents?"

Bruce took the emergency stairwell, hurrying down each level.

"Agents Johnson, Mackenzie and Rodriguez are not in the Tower..."

"What the hell happened, FRIDAY?"

The was a pause as Bruce reached the medical level.

"I’m sorry, Bruce, but I cannot answer that question."

"What do you mean you can’t answer that?" Bruce demanded tearing through the hall. Medical staff scattered before him, gawking at the newly returned Avenger. One had the foresight to catch his eye, hold up 9 fingers.

FRIDAY remained silent as he tore into Room Nine. Rhodes lay in the bed, eyes closed, seemingly unconscious. Bruce grabbed his medical chart.

"Projectile weapon, wound to back. Incapacitator serum in stream...an ICER? That’s SHIELD technology."

Bruce looked over at Rhodey.
"Coulson’s Agents did this?" he demanded. “Now, when the world’s at stake?”

"No..."

Rhodey’s eyes fluttered open a moment, then shut again.

"Not...Agents..."

"Then who, James?"

Rhodey remained silent.

"We just lost Tony."

Rhodey’s eyes flew open.

"And the spider kid, and Strange, and the Time Gem. Wong is preparing for a mystical Armageddon, And our back up, with two of the most powerful Inhumans on Earth, never showed.”

"They’re missing?" Rhodey closed his eyes. “Oh no. Hell, no. The hacking...It was all a trap.”

"For who? The Agents?" Bruce attempted to bring himself back into focus. “Who shot you?”

"P...."

"Who, Phil? Peter? Piper? Who??"

"Pepper."

Bruce stumbled backwards in disbelief.

James Rhodes opened his eyes.

"Call Steve.”

---

**CODA**

**UK**

Jemma Simmons glared at Leo Fitz.

Her gaze was replicated by most of the female members of Excalibur.

Fitz held up his hands.

"I didn’t say it was a bad thing, Jems. I just said it’d never been done before. That’s all!"

"It’s been over 36 seasons, Leo. There’s no reason why the Doctor shouldn’t be a woman.” Jemma huffed.

"I didn’t..."

"And besides, the Doctor’s not human, she could regenerate as either sex quite easily.”

"I know! Jems, all I said was...”

Leo sighed, as Jemma seemed quite prepared to argue what was or wasn’t said for the rest of the
evening.

"I'm sorry?"

Jemma sniffed, but seemed mollified.

Brian Braddock chuckled.

"Nice save, Fitz."

His wife, Meggan, turned her glare on him.

"And what did you mean by that?"

The communication alarm sounded out.

"Saved by the bell..." Brian muttered. He tapped at his tablet.

"Brian here."

"Excalibur, this is Nomad One."

The rest of the room sat up straighter.

"Steve, it’s Brian. You’re on speaker with the team."

A sigh.

"Are you secure?"

Meggan made a gesture, and the air shimmered.

"We are now, Captain. What’s up?"

"Our team, are they there?"

"Fitz and I are here," responded Jemma, "But Wanda and Vision went for a night out."

"Where? How long ago?"

"When we got back from our mission." Brian frowned. "I’d say about six hours ago? Cap, we really appreciate the loan of your people to deal with the Hole. I don’t want to interfere with how you run things, but I don’t make a habit of monitoring my team’s private affairs."

Fitz snickered.

"This is critical, Brian, we must have eyes on Vision as soon as possible."

Before Brian could answer, Agent Peter Wisdom rushed in.

"Blasts in the city," he gasped. "Consistent with Maximoff’s hex bolts."

Steve growled.

"Coordinates, Captain Britain. NOW!"
First, slight real person cameo reference, carried over from the Tie that Binds. All real life references meant with respect.

Secondly, we are now into the meat of Infinity War. I am going to assume that most of you have seen it. I'll be using selected scenes from the movie which fit into my "version" or have departed from the movie canon, so if it seems like I'm skipping around a little, I probably am. Otherwise, I'll be writing a novelization of the movie, which really wasn’t my intent. In about 95% of the time, you can assume missing scenes exist, they're just happening off to the side.

So what do the Hales want with our Agents? And where are they all going? (GULP).

And before we catch up with our Android in Distress, we’ll take a short flashback... just how did HYDRA get their hands on Pepper Potts?
Everyone loves a flashback!!

In Summer 2017, Pepper Potts, fed up with Tony Stark's inability to separate himself from Iron Man, decided to take a little time off to re-evaluate her decisions.

Unfortunately, some decisions will wind up being made for her.

New York City, Summer 2017

Stark Tower

"You said you were done, Tony."

Tony Stark fidgeted a little, then met Pepper Potts' eyes.

"I am, Peps. I mean, I go on a flight here and there...

"A flight. That's what you call THIS?"

She brandished the front page of the newspaper at him, and Tony winced away.

"What was I supposed to do? Leave the kid to die, Pepper?"

"No, you were supposed to be bound by the Sokavia Accords, Tony." she snapped. "Iron Man was supposed to be retired. Instead, you're looking for any excuse to get back in the suit, fly off, save the day."

Tony glared at her.

"Do you know how many times I've resisted, Pepper? How many times I've watched the news, saw people die, and know that I could've been there to save them? For the sake of "national security", I've sat back. Except I didn't do it for the nation, Peps. I did it for you."

They were silent for a while. Tony picked up his StarkPad, his fingers flying over its surface. He sighed, and put it down.

"You used to understand, Pepper. Why I needed to help. Why I feel so helpless now. What happened to you?"

"That 'me', Tony? She died. By inches. Every time you and the Avengers went out to fight. And every time you came home, a little more bruised. A little more beaten. A little more determined to be
a hero like the one your father wanted.”

Tony recoiled.

"If you think that, Ms. Potts, then why did you agree to marry me?"

"Because you needed me to bail you out of a jam, yet once again, Mr. Stark. And isn't that something, where I let myself get engaged for a press conference?"

Tony turned, and looked out the window.

"You don't have to be bound by that, Pepper. If...you...really feel that way. I'm sure I can call around, find some friendly faces. You can walk in, and then walk right back on out." He gave a sad chuckle. "It's what they all expect, anyways. Vegas's line on us actually getting married stands at 225 to 1."

Pepper walked over to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"I love you, Tony. Truly I do. I just need some time to think about whether I can do this. You are who you are. I shouldn't be asking you to change."

Tony nodded, his hand reaching up to clasp hers.

"Do you want some more time off, Peps?"

She shook her head.

"Last time that happened, SI stock took a hit. We just recovered from it. No...say I'm going on a fact-finding tour. I'll visit some of SI's global offices. Be the face, look at some documents. It'll give me time to think."

Tony was still.

"When do you want to leave?"

"I've already filed my plans. Jordan will be filling in for me day to day here. And you can handle the rest. Now that Iron Man is retired, you should have more time to devote to SI."

She squeezed his shoulders and stepped back.

Tony looked off into the distance, his shoulders squared.

"Just...come back to me, Pepper Potts. Whichever way you decide. Promise me you'll come back."

She nodded.

"I promise."

Then she turned, and let herself out of the room, leaving Tony alone, gazing out into the night sky.

Singapore Changi Airport
"Ms. Potts, I am delighted to meet you. How was your flight?"

"It was fine. Long, a little tiring, but fine. Thank you for meeting me here at the airport, Ms..."

"Lee..." The slight Asian woman smiled at her. "Candice Lee. You can call me Candice."

"Well, thank you, Candice."

The two women made their way through the airport.

"I must apologize again, Ms. Potts. The StarkJet facilities on the our tower are undergoing routine repair. I must say, this meeting caught us slightly off guard."

"That's not a problem, Candice. This is more of a corporate spot check. I've been reviewing SI Asia's reports, and I don't anticipate any issues."

"I'm happy to hear that."

The black sedan slid up to the curb. A uniformed chauffeur got out, and opened the door for the women.

Pepper and Candice slid in, as the man put her baggage into the trunk.

As the car pulled away into traffic, Candice glanced at the driver. His eyes were firmly fixed on the road.

"Mr. Stark, how is he?"

Pepper frowned.

"Well, last we spoke. He asked me to pass on his best wishes."

"Most appreciated." Candice held out a fob. "Your security clearance for the Singapore offices, Ms. Potts. I find that it works better when held in the middle."

Pepper took the fob, and automatically ran her fingers over the length. A set of needles emerged, piercing the fingers holding it. She collapsed against the seat.

"And that, Ms. Potts," murmured Candice, retrieving the fob, "is why Mr. Stark refuses to handle anything himself."

The car drove on into the night.

Unknown

Pepper woke up slowly, her mind swimming through a fog. A mild headache pulsed at her temples.

Strange, she thought. She didn't remember going out for drinks. The last thing she remembered was getting off the plane in Singapore and meeting...

Then memory flooded back. She jerked upright, and looked around.
It was an ordinary room. If you added a couple of windows, it might even look like a generic college dorm room. Twin bed, dresser, mirror. Her unopened bags were over in the corner. And she was still dressed in the clothes she had been wearing when she got off the plane.

The door to the room stood wide open. These were very strange kidnappers.

She rubbed the back of her neck. The tracker was still there. Good. Someone would be coming for her.

She quietly got out of bed, and moved out into the hall. No windows, or any markings on the corridor halls. There was no way of telling where she was. Just a series of doors on either side. She tested one - locked. The place was silent. For all she knew, she might be the only one there.

Moving down the hall, she noticed a door propped open. Sneaking up on it, she peered around the corner.

The door let into a common area, with tables and chairs set up throughout the room. Deserted, like everywhere else in this place. At the back of the room was a longer board, with food set up on it. Pepper moved through the room for a closer look. Fruit, bread and jams, cereal boxes - Corn Flakes, Raisin Bran, Corn Pops and Captain Crunch.

Well, she thought, that argued for her being back in the States.

There was a sound behind her, and she whirled into a defensive posture.

A blonde girl, maybe 16, 17, walked to the sideboard, and began setting herself up for breakfast. Her black hoodie had no labels, no insignia. Two white earbuds blasted heavy metal into her ears.

And she took no notice of Pepper.

"Excuse me."

Cereal in bowl.

"Who are are you? What am I doing here?"

Milk added.

"What do you want?"

The girl stopped, seemed to consider. Then added an orange to her plate.

"Uh...hello? Prisoner here, out of her room?"

Spoon and napkin selected.

"Will you say SOMETHING?"

The girl turned, balancing her tray carefully. Then walked out of the room. Never saying one word to Pepper. Never giving one indication that she knew she was there.
"What the hell?"

"Ms. Potts?"

Pepper looked up again. An older woman in uniform stood in the doorway, a friendly smile on her face.

"General Katherine Hale, US Air Force."

Pepper sighed in relief.

"Thank God. Look, I need to contact Tony Stark, let him know I'm OK. I think someone tried to kidnap me last night, he'll be frantic by now...Iron Man's probably buzzing Singapore as we speak."

Hale held up her hands.

"It's all right, Ms. Potts, I assure you. We'll set up some communications for you soon, cell phones don't work down here. While you're waiting, why don't we have some breakfast, and I can fill you in."

After breakfast, Pepper accepted General Hale's offer to show her through the complex. As they walked through the corridors of the bunker, Pepper and Hale were joined by several other uniformed soldiers.

"I...really...would like to call Tony now, General."

"In good time, Ms. Potts. Can I call you Pepper?"

"I think Ms. Potts would be better."

Hale shrugged.

"Let me be frank then, Ms. Potts. We've been keeping an eye on you and your relationship with Mr. Stark."

Pepper's eyes narrowed.

"Along with the rest of the Western world." she huffed.

"We all can see the strain that Iron Man puts on your relationship. It's out of your control, isn't it?"

"I don't particularly like your insinuations, General. I assure you, not that it's any of your business, Tony and I are fine."

"Fine enough to make an unscheduled trip through SI offices located anywhere other than in the US?"

Hale stopped her in front of a larger steel door.

"Look, Ms. Potts. There was a time in my life when I felt like everything was out of control and I needed a new purpose, and I see you going through the same ordeal. I think you and I can help each other."
Pepper felt a cold chill go down her spine. She decided to play along.

"How?"

At a gesture, one of Hale's soldiers opened the door. It led to another corridor, but this time, the walls were blank, with only one door at the end.

"After the Battle of New York, we found transceivers in the wreckage of one of the Chitauri cruisers. We reached out."

Hale paused.

"Someone answered."

"You made contact with aliens?" asked Pepper incredulously.

"It's an alliance of several races. They call themselves the Confederacy."

She opened the door, and the women stepped in.

"Let me show you what I'm working on." Hale concluded.

Pepper stared. It was a oblong object, made of no metal she had ever seen before. There were symbols inscribed all around it, with several levers at its top.

"What is this?"

Hale shrugged.

"To be honest, I have no idea. They use it to move ships through the galaxies."

Pepper stared at the General, at a unusual loss for words.

"Let me explain, Ms. Potts. My predecessors used this device to meet with them, face to face. But they hadn't just made contact. They struck a deal for protection."

"From what?"

"The war coming to Earth. It's only a matter of time before it reaches us."

"But we never heard of this! SHIELD was the key people on the ground after New York. How did they not hear about this? Then the military trusted the Avengers...then Tony...for threats of this size, and I would have heard hints of this from Tony or James. How did this intel never get to us?"

"Because it's not Air Force."

"Not Air Force? Then...who?"

Pepper stared at Hale in disbelief, realization dawning.

"No...it can't be..."
"Ms. Potts...Pepper..."

"Talbot and the ATCU took you all out!"

"I know this is a shock...."

Pepper backed away, tried to put as much space as she could from Hale.

"You're HYDRA!"

Hale sighed.

"SHIELD, HYDRA...Don't you see these symbols, these differences, are irrelevant? We are humans fighting for our survival. And we need every weapon we can get in this fight, which is why I need you."

Hale took a breath.

"Tony Stark would never listen to me, Ms. Potts. He's too short sighted, he doesn't have the will to do what needs to be done to save the world. You though, you're pragmatic. I know I can count on you."

Pepper reflexively shook her head. Ignoring it, Hale went on.

"I need your access to Stark Industries, Ms. Potts. You are the only other person Tony Stark has let deep into his system, you're his override, his overseer. With Stark's servers, I can access the information that we need to fend off both this...Thanos...and the Confederacy. Earth will survive and take its rightful place in the universe."

Pepper swallowed hard.

"Under HYDRA's direction, of course. No thanks."

Hale frowned.

"I was hoping you and I could see eye to eye. Well, we have time. Let's try having this conversation when you're feeling more reasonable."

Hale jerked her head at the soldiers. As they surrounded her, Pepper drew herself up. She spat at the General's feet.

"I'll never help you."

The soldiers marched her back out. This time, the room they took her to was barren.

_Hurry, Tony_, Pepper thought as they closed the door behind them.

Three weeks later, General Hale and the younger blond woman marched back into her cell. During that time, Pepper had been starved, then had her water supply drugged. She was allowed to sleep only at irregular intervals. The temperature in her room fluctuated between ice cold to boiling hot. Nothing physical, yet, but Pepper had been through worse at Killian's hands when he had injected
Extremis into her. She could hold out for Tony.

Pepper glared at her captors in defiance, resting on the floor.

The blond one squatted down to eye level, just out of her reach.

"Aww...still thinking that your Iron Knight is coming to your rescue? That's totally adorbs. I'd ship you, but you two are a little old school for me. I'm more of a WebQuake type person."

"I hope you haven't been relying on your tracker, Ms. Potts. That was redirected by my associate before you ever reached this place." General Hale informed her.

“Your honeybear's not coming for you, snookums." taunted the blond. "Haven't you figured it out by now?"

"Enough, Ruby." scolded Hale.

Ruby smirked and took a place by the doorway.

"Maybe my tracker's not working," returned Pepper, "But I'm sure when I stop returning Tony's calls, he'll figure something is wrong."

Hale gave her a little smile.

"Mr. Stark has become a little...preoccupied recently. Seems he's thrown in with the Inhuman cause for some reason. Not that we mind, that'll make things easier for us. But yes, he's been calling you. And you've been having such lovely chats..."

Ruby put on a headset, and the speaker in her cell crackled.

In Pepper's voice.

"Oh Tony," Ruby cooed. "I miss you too. But I need more time here. SI Asia is a cesspool, and I need to make sure things are set right before I come back. Go lay a bet in Vegas for us."

Ruby took off the headset and smirked at Pepper.

Pepper felt her heart sink.

"No voice recognition system in the world would tell the two of you apart." noted Hale. "Not that Stark would feel he needed to use it."

Pepper hoisted herself to her feet. She looked General Hale in her eyes.

"I would rather die before I help HYDRA."

General Hale laughed.

"You Avenger-type people. So melodramatic. You won't die, Pepper Potts."

Hale's gaze hardened.
"But you will comply."

The soldiers came in her cell door. Pepper resisted as best as she could, but they easily dragged her out, down to another room.

With a chair. And a projector and screen.

HYDRA Base, Appalachian Mountains

General Hale waved Candice Lee, her most trusted assistant, to a chair in her office. Candice took a seat.

"It took longer than expected, but it's done. She's ours."

Candice smiled.

"She has no memory of these last few months. She'll continue on her executive tour, and then go back to Tony Stark thinking she's set SI Asia to right."

"Do you want her to interfere in this whole Inhuman cause Stark is playing with?" Candice asked.

"No." responded Hale. "We'll just let this farce with Ross play out, and then we will have everything we need."

"We have secured the Gravitonium, and have several leads on the chamber. Will your daughter be ready?"

Hale scowled.

"She'd better be. We are down to few options and limited time."

Hale leaned forward in her chair, her eyes piercing her assistant.

"We will save the world, and HYDRA will rise once more to lead the way in this new era."

Candice nodded, then cocked her head.

"What about SHIELD?"

Hale scoffed.

"They're outlawed, scattered. Phillip Coulson is gone, my sources confirm this. With him out of the way, there's no one left to truly believe in SHIELD. No, they can't stop us."

"Yes, Ma'am." Candice agreed.

She rose from her chair and saluted.

"Hail HYDRA."
First, situations and some dialogue from this chapter come from the Agents of SHIELD episode "Rise and Shine" (S5x15). All credit to the writers, cast and crew.

I was asked by a commenter back in The Tie That Binds where Pepper Potts was. At the time, I didn't know, and I had yet to see Spiderman: Homecoming. It seemed strange to me that Pepper would accept an engagement to bail Tony out of his press conference jam. In this AU, General Talbot was never captured by General Hale, and was successfully treated at the military hospital. Pepper Potts would be another obvious target by Hale's forces to get the information they need. But she would have to leave Tony's side to be that target. Hence her taking time off to re-think this whole thing through. And yeah, she should've had a bodyguard there. Guess she and Tony forgot all about it.

All right, let's head back to the present, where the Black Order is doing their best to wreck Wanda and Vision's night out. But the UK has its own defenders...
Chapter Summary

The Black Order arrives in the UK to take the Mind Stone. (Wanda and Vision are going to want a do-over on that date...) Luckily, some new friends are close at hand, and two groups will unite to begin to solve a real headache of a problem... (sorry).

Unfortunately, things are not going so well in Knowhere...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Scotland

Vision stared up, aghast.

Corvus Blade looked down at him, impassive. Behind him, his partner, Proxima Midnight held a dazed Wanda Maximoff at spear point.

"Give up the stone," she ordered. "And she lives."

Wanda shook her head.

"Viz..."

She paled as the point of Proxima's spear sunk into her throat.

Corvus tilted his head.

"Well?"

Earlier that evening...

Wanda slowly moved down the deserted street. Fitz and Simmons were back at the Excalibur base, but she and Vision needed some time to talk.

So far this evening, they hadn't done a lot of...talking...

She smiled, and turned to him.

"So there's a 10 AM to Glasgow to give us more time together before you went back."

Vision held her gaze.

"What if I miss that train?"

Wanda flushed.
"There is an 11."

Vision took her in his arms.

"What if I missed all the trains? What if I didn’t go back?"

Wanda stood still.

"You gave Stark your word."

Vision shook his head.

"I'd rather give it to you."

Wanda swallowed.

"There are people who are expecting me too, you know. We both made promises."

"Not to each other. Wanda... These past few months, we've stolen these moments. I've been trying to see if something like this could work." He paused for a moment, then continued. "I, I... I think... It works."

Wanda smiled and stroked his face.

"It works. It works."

"Stay." Vision asked.

Wanda's eyes met his, then she stiffened, her gaze going up to the night sky.

Vision frowned.

"...Or not. If I'm overstepping..."

Wanda shook her head, and pointed over his shoulder.

"What was that?"

A light flashed, and then two figures faced them, weapons drawn.

Vision took one last glance at Wanda, then turned his gaze back at his captor.

Before he could utter his surrender, the earth shuddered beneath him.

"Hold on..." he heard in his mind.

Then the street exploded beneath them, knocking the Black Order off their feet.

Wanda crawled over to Vision.

"Get up...get up...we gotta go..."
Proxima flipped to her feet, Corvus behind her. She snarled, hefting her spear. As she plunged it down towards Wanda and Vision, it was met by a black shield, which shoved her back into her partner.

A helmeted and armored man faced them, sword in hand.

"Halt in the name of the Queen!" Black Knight ordered. "This pair is under our protection. You will not molest them further."

Corvus sneered.

"One man alone cannot stop the Black Order."

"Mayhap, but who said I was alone?"

A blue and red uniformed figure strode up beside him. A blond and brunette woman took their places on his other side.

Captain Britain glared at them.

"You are on UK soil, aliens. And I hold power here."

A strong gust of wind gave emphasis to his words.

Corvus took two step forward, snarling. Captain Britain dodged the first blow, then dropped his opponent with a left hook.

Proxima moved to follow, but from the ground, Wanda lifted her hands, concentrating. A red blast hit Proxima in the chest, sending her sprawling beside Corvus.

Looking up, she saw a slender man standing casually over them, fire knives shooting out from his finger tips.

"I really wouldn't, if I were you." Peter Wisdom advised.

Proxima scowled.

"We don't want to kill you." rang a silvery voice in all their heads. It hardened. "But we will."

"You'll never get another chance." Proxima threatened.

Placing her hand on Corvus' shoulder, she bowed her head. At least they now knew where it was. It would keep.

The two transported in a dust of light, and the street went dark.

Wanda assisted Vision to his feet. The gash Proxima's sword had made in his side didn't bleed, but unsettled the heroes anyway.

A sound behind them, and the party turned as one, Wanda focusing her bolts, Captain Britain and Black Knight moving to shield them, Meggan readying another gust of wind. Peter moved up to guard their backs.

Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff came into the light.

"I take it we missed the fight?" Natasha asked.
Bruce's frame filled the holo-screen.

"...and no one has been able to get ahold of Tony, Strange or the Agents. Elliot's tried, but he cannot reach that team that went after Coulson."

"The Guardians. And from Agent Coulson told us, Thor is with them." Steve rubbed his head. "This isn't good."

"It's not." agreed Brian Braddock.

From behind them, Vision sat up on the table.

"That should hold you for a bit." proclaimed Leo Fitz, putting the welder aside. "I mean, I'm not Tony Stark, and I don't have access to my lab, but at least your components aren't exposed."

"This is better than I expected." responded Vision. "I don't think Tony could've done much better."

Fitz beamed.

They took their places in the conference.

"What now?" Bruce asked.

Vision sighed.

"I've been giving a good deal of thought to this entity in my head about its nature. But also, its composition. I think if it were exposed to a sufficiently powerful energy source, something, very similar to its own signature, perhaps..."

Wanda's eyes narrowed.

"Its molecular integrity could fail." she observed.

Natasha shook her head.

"And you, with it. We're not having this conversation."

Vision looked at them pleadingly.

"Eliminating the stone is the only way to be certain that..."

"Thanos can't get it." Bruce finished.

"That's too high a price." snapped Wanda.

Vision gazed sadly at her.

"Only you have the power to pay it. Thanos threatens half the Universe. One life cannot stand in the way of defeating him."

"But it should." Steve said quietly. "We don't trade lives, Vision."
Leo looked at Jemma Simmons, and drew her aside. The two began to whisper.

Vision turned his gaze onto Steve.

"Captain, 70 years ago, you laid down your life to save millions of people. Tell me, why is this any different?"

The room was silent.

Bruce looked at them all. A glimmer of hope was in his eyes.

"Because you might have a choice."

They all stared at him.

"Your mind is made up of a complex construct of overlays." Bruce continued. "Jarvis, Ultron, Tony, me, the stone. All of them mixed together. All of them learning from one another."

"Of course!" exclaimed Jemma. "It would explain so much..."

"You're saying Vision isn't just a stone?" asked Brian.

Bruce nodded.

"I'm saying that... If we take out the stone, there's still a whole lot of Vision left."

Vision slowly nodded. He reached out and took Wanda's hand.

"Perhaps the best parts."

"Can we do that?" asked Natasha.

Bruce shook his head. They looked at Fitz and Jemma. They frowned, thinking.

"Not me." said Fitz finally. "And not here."

"Not even back at the Mansion." concluded Jemma. "Mr. Stark's tower...maybe...but it's compromised."

"We don't have a lot of time. We need someone and somewhere fast." observed Bruce.

Steve smiled.

"I know somewhere. Bruce, grab Rhodey and a jet and get over here."

He glanced at Fitz and Jemma.

"I'm sorry, but Thanos must come first. We can find out what happened to your friends afterwards."

Jemma nodded.

"They can take care of themselves. We'll head back to New York, try to pick..."

Steve held up his hand for a moment. He looked at Brian.

"We could use all the help we can get. You guys want in?"
Brian shook his head regretfully.

"I am sorry, Steve, I wish we could. When Merlin gave me these powers, he also gave me a charge to protect the doorway between the realities. With Strange missing, it is only a matter of time before something tries to take advantage. We are the last line of defense here. We cannot leave our posts. Not even for this."

"Half of life in the Universe?" snapped Natasha.

Brian looked at her, his brown eyes fading out into a starry inky pool, peering into an unknown depth.

"Half of **this** Universe, Natasha Romanova. If the Door falls, it would be **all** life across all Universes that would be at risk."

He closed his eyes. When they reopened, they were his normal brown.

Steve turned his attention to the Agents.

"Fitz, Simmons, I know you want to go back and help look for Agent Johnson and the rest. But I would consider it a personal favour if you would come with us to help find a solution for the mind stone."

"I know your reputations from the Academy." Natasha added. "And you've had that experience with those LMD's..."

"AIDA..." Jemma scowled.

"I guess nothing's ever wasted. Dr. Radcliffe did most of the initial work on her." sighed Fitz.

"**IT.**"

"Whatever." Brian headed that argument off at the pass. "We'll get the Agents back in the States on their trail. We could also contact your Inhuman friend Vijay to assist. I think your place is with the Captain here."

Fitz and Jemma looked at each other. Finally, they nodded reluctantly.

"I don't think we'd be of much use tracking Daisy and the rest down." Jemma noted. "Pepper Potts would have been smart enough to wipe any trace of where they were going. And she has full access to FRIDAY."

"And with Tony gone," finished Fitz, "there's no one to lock her back out of the system." He sighed. "I wish we knew what her end game was."

"I wish we knew what happened to her," added Natasha. "I knew Pepper Potts. She might have been pissed at Tony, but this? This isn't like her at all."

"Our team...we've seen something like this before..." mused Jemma. "Let me think this over."

"I may be of some assistance with FRIDAY while we wait for Bruce and James." Vision offered. "Pepper was the only one who had total access to FRIDAY other than Tony. But before FRIDAY was JARVIS. And there might be some back doors left open to me."
Steve nodded.

"Go ahead, but be careful. Everyone, pack up. We leave as soon as Bruce and Rhodey get here."

He grinned at the two Agents.

"There's someone that I'd like you to meet."

CODA
The Collector's Hideout, Knowhere.

*If they had only gone RIGHT*, Peter Quill thought, aiming his gun unerringly at the large purple menace holding his lover prisoner.

"Let her go."

Gamora strained against Thanos' grip.

"Peter..." she whispered, tears filling her eyes as she struggled.

"Or I'm gonna blow that nut-sack of a chin right off your face!" Peter threatened as his grip tightened on the trigger.

"You need to aim lower." Gamora begged. "Not him."

Peter realized. This is what she had asked for on the Milano. And the rest of his team lay in blocks and globs behind him.

"You promised!"

Peter swallowed.

Thanos laughed.

"Oh, daughter. You expect too much from him."

Thanos looked at Peter.

"She's asked, hasn't she?"

"Do it." Gamora whispered. Then she gathered up the last of her strength, and yelled, "Do it!"

"I told you to go right!" Peter whispered, tears filling his eyes.

He aimed the gun lower. His blast would hit Gamora between her eyes, killing her instantly.

"I love you, more than anything." she said, steeling herself for the blow.

"I love you, too."
Peter Quill fired.

Bubbles came out the end of his gun.

Thanos nodded approvingly.

"I like you."

Then he gestured, and he and Gamora were gone.

Chapter End Notes

There are many versions of Excalibur out there. Many of the teammates, like Shadowcat, Nightcrawler, and Sage, however, are a part of the Mutant side of the MCU (and while I know they're one happy family now...I think we'll keep them apart for the purposes of this story.) Excalibur in this AU is comprised of Brian Braddock (Captain Britain), his sister Betsy (before she was trained by the Hand, and thank you to reader ranlynn for pointing that out to me), Meggan, Dane Whitman (Black Knight), and Peter Wisdom. Apparently Vision, Wanda and Fitzsimmons were assisting with a problem...but that is another story for another day.

Next up, Phil Coulson and Melinda May's travels take them off planet.

It's certainly not Tatooine...
I'd Walk the Wire (For You)

Chapter Summary

Agents Phil Coulson and Melinda May arrive on Vormir in search of the Soul Stone, hoping it can save Phil from his deal with the Ghost Rider.

But there is a Price...

Chapter Notes

Timeline Note - consider this chapter taking place during the previous ones. If we were to place it in the IW movie, right now, Thanos is trying to convince Gamora to eat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vormir

Wong’s portal closed behind Phil Coulson and Melinda May.

Phil looked around. It was quiet. Sand dunes swept out towards a purple horizon. In the far off, he could just make out a hazy outline of a mountain range. No plants or animal life as far as he could see. It was quiet, solitary, desolate.

He grinned at May, a little nervously.

"First Tatooine." he commented. "Now Jakku."

May rolled her eyes.

"You are such a dork, Coulson."

He grinned at her.

"But you love me anyways."

"I do." May agreed.

Phil reached for her, taking her in his arms for a brief kiss. He rested his forehead against hers.

"Come on," he finally said. "The sooner we get that stone, the sooner we can defeat Thanos."

"No, the sooner we get that stone, the sooner we can get the Rider out of your soul, Phil." May glared at him for a moment, then softened. "Then defeat Thanos. And then find a secluded beach on Tahiti."
Phil smirked back at his love.

"I like the way you think."

They turned. Where there was nothing less than a minute ago, a black mountain jutted up into the purple sky.

May lifted an eyebrow.

"Not ominous at all..."

Phil swallowed.

"I have a very bad feeling about this..."

May punched him in the arm.

"Now, it's even worse." Phil winced, rubbing the affected spot.

As they carefully made their way towards the peak, May sighed.

"One does not simply walk into Mordor...." she offered.

"HEY...."

At the base of the mountain peak, an entrance to a rocky trail was carved out the side. It wound up the side of the peak, but Phil couldn't see where it led.

He looked up through it. They still had not seen or heard anyone. A light mist had come up, threatening to turn into a drizzle of moisture.

"Is it just me, or does this just scream TRAP! to you?" he asked.

"There doesn't seem anywhere else to go." May commented. She drew her gun. "I'll cover you."

As the two passed under the arch and started up the trail, a spectral voice came out of nowhere.

"You don't need that."

In response, Phil pulled his weapon and took a defensive stance at her side.

A long-suffering sigh.

"We are far beyond the need of mortal weapons here."

A figure coalesced in front of the two Agents. Cloaked in rags, its face hidden, it hovered on the trail before them.

"Welcome, SHIELD Director Phillip Coulson, son of Robert & Julie."

It inclined its head towards May.
"Agent Melinda May, 'The...Cavalry...', daughter of William & Lian."

Phil's eyebrows lifted, and he glanced briefly at a scowling May before returning his attention to the figure.

"You know us?" he asked.

The figure sighed again.

"It is my curse to know all who journey here."

"Where is the Soul Stone?" demanded May.

It hesitated.

"You should know, it extracts a terrible price."

Phil took a step forward.

"We're prepared." he declared.

May nodded beside him.

The figure shook its head.

"We all think that at first."

It lifted its hands to its cowl.

"We are all wrong."

Pushing it back, it lifted its face to the light.

Phil and Melinda gasped.

"You!" Phil exclaimed, training his gun on the figure.

"Me." agreed the Red Skull. "I cannot harm you, Coulson, May. And you do not have much time left. Even now, a being tortures his offspring to find this location."

"Then let's go." snapped Phil.

The Red Skull turned and floated up the trail. Phil and May holstered their guns and followed.

As they continued up the trail, the mist turned into the promised drizzle. It was turning colder, May thought. At the summit, it might even be snow.

She hated snow.

She asked, "How did you get here?"
The figure never turned, leading them upward on the path.

"How much is known about my fate on Earth?" he asked.

"Not much." replied Phil. "And even that information was very recent, when Steve Rogers was rescued and revived."

"Ahh...the Captain lived. I do not begrudge him his victory, not after all these years."

Phil glanced at him skeptically as they climbed the steep trail.

"You repented?"

"Of a sort. I never gave a thought to the nature of the Tesseract. Just to its power. And I paid the price."

"You were able to hold the Tesseract." noted Phil.

The Red Skull shook his head.

"It cast me out. Banished me here. Guiding others to a treasure I cannot possess."

It stopped at the top of the trail, three quarters up the mountain peak. A circular plateau stretched in front of them.

"What you seek lies in front of you." He motioned for Phil and Melinda to proceed him. "As does what you fear."

The two Agents walked into the clearing. It was barren, no life of any kind, rocky stone with strange carvings cut deep into it. Phil walked over to the edge of the plateau, and looked over. It was a very long way down.

A spatter of snowflakes began to fall.

"What's this?" snapped May.

She strode back to the plateau entrance and glared at the Red Skull. It gazed back at her.

"The price. Soul holds a special place among the Infinity Stones. You might say it is a certain...wisdom."

"Tell me what it needs. The Universe is at stake, we'll pay it." said Phil.

The Red Skull focused his attention on him.

"To ensure whoever possesses it, truly understands its power...The Stone demands a sacrifice."

"Of what?" May demanded, a hint of dread beginning to grow in her mind.

The Red Skull gazed at her, and there was pity in his eyes.

"In order to take the Stone...You must lose that which you love."
He looked at Phil, who had gone ashen.

"A soul, for a soul." he finished.

"No..." whispered May.

"You have not much time left, Coulson, May. He comes. Stay or go, it is your choice."

"No, Phil. There are other ways to defeat Thanos. The Time Stone. Vision's Mind Stone. Let's go."

She started towards the entrance, then turned. Phil hadn't moved from the plateau's edge. His heels brushed the very edges of the rock.

"Phil..." she asked.

"You said a soul." Phil finally asked. "Do we have to kill someone else? Can I...?"

He gestured to the cliff's edge.

"Don't even thi..." May started.

The Red Skull considered Phil, a hint of surprise on his skeletal face. Then he nodded.

"A soul is a soul, Phil Coulson. But the holder must understand what has been lost. It must be witnessed."

Phil nodded, then looked over at May. He didn't say a word.

His expression said it all.

"No...Phillip J. Coulson, don't you dare."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah...uhhh...I'll see you after the next chapter...
You Mean Everything To Me

Chapter Summary

The Soul Stone is claimed.

Chapter Notes

Warning tags: This chapter only - suicide (self-sacrifice)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vormir

"Melinda..."

"Don't say it." snapped Melinda May. She glared at Phil Coulson. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes." Phil Coulson's voice was gentle. "Yes, we do. We took an oath, Mel."

"So you keep reminding us. But when does it stop?"

"Not here. Not when half the universe is depending on us."

His eyes were sad, but his stance was resolute.

"This isn't fair."

Phil gave a bitter chuckle.

"Was anything about the last five years fair, my love?" he sighed. "HYDRA, Ward, Tripp, Skye, Lincoln, Mace, AIDA, the Framework? I never asked for this. But there is nothing I'd regret. Except for the time I lost with you."

May's mind raced. Suddenly, she got an idea. It would have to be quick, though. She walked to the centre of the plateau.

"OK. You're right. We have to do this." she agreed.

The spatter of snow started to stick, and formed a light layer over the ground. Flakes stuck in her hair, but she made no move to brush them away.

May dashed a tear from her eye, and watched as Phil sombrely followed her hand's movements. He swallowed hard.

"My last request, then I'll let you go. A kiss, Phil. Give me one last kiss, and I can do this."
She was proud of how her voice remained steady, how it didn’t break, how she kept her screams at an uncaring Fate inside.

She just needed that kiss...and then she could do what needed to be done.

Phil took a step away from the edge. Then two. Then he paused, cocking his head. He gave her a slow, sad smile.

May froze, watching his every movement.

He gave a slight laugh.

"Very good, Mel. You nearly had me. And I would have done the same thing, if our situations were reversed. Get me in arms reach, then take me down and take my place."

He took his steps back to the edge, his eyes on her the whole time.

May closed her eyes in defeat.

When he spoke next, his voice was gentle, but implacable.

“I need you to finish the mission, Mel. Take the Soul Stone. Destroy it if you have to, do whatever it takes to keep it away from Thanos. Then keep watch over Daisy. I need her to lead the next generation of SHIELD. And I..."

His voice broke.

"I love you...all of you. Watch over our daughter, Melinda."

"I cannot delay Thanos much longer." came from the Red Skull, who had been watching the trail. "I am...sorry."

He sounded extremely regretful.

"It's time, Melinda. I just need you to know. Everything that's happened since Fury brought me back... you were worth coming back for. These last years, after everything we’ve faced, everything we’ve been through, I don't regret a single moment, since it brought me back to you. I'm only sorry that I have to hurt you one last time."

May swallowed back her tears. There would be time for them later.

"I'm not. Sorry, that is. Every moment I had with you, every fight, every battle, every sacrifice that we’ve shared? They led me to you. I'd...I'll never regret them. And if there is a way to find you, Phil Coulson, I swear to God, I will move the universe for you."

They looked at each other one last time. One more breath.

"I love you." he said quietly.

She smiled through her tears.

"I know."
Phil Coulson took a step back. And over.

Melinda May ran to the edge to see Phil’s body fall through space. She kept her eyes on him as his body impacted the unforgiving ground below. Only then did she let her knees buckle, as she screamed her grief to the stars.

The clouds gathered around the plateau and thunder rolled through the mountain. A flash pierced the sky. She closed her eyes against it.

Opening them, May found herself standing on the shores of a beach. A strange orange tint coloured everything, the beach, the ocean, the sky, Phil...

Phil?

She looked at her love. He looked years younger, like how they had met at the Academy. His brown hairline was only slightly receding, both arms, his real arms, were crossed over his chest. His eyes were sad and he kept them focused on her.

"I'm sorry, Melinda. Sorry to do this to you, sorry for everything. I love you."

"I love you too." she whispered, her voice carrying as if she had roared at the top of her lungs. "This wasn't worth it."

He nodded.

"That knowledge...is why we will win in the end." Phil assured her. "I'll see you later."

A flash.

May sat up in a pool of liquid. She hoped it was water. She was back on the surface of Vormir, the mountain far in the background. Numbly, she closed her hand over a stone, and brought it to the surface.

The orange stone was warm to the touch, gently pulsing, as if it was trying to comfort her. She held it at eye-level, examining it. No hint of Phil Coulson could be seen in its swirling depths.

She sat in her misery for several moments, then realized that she needed to go. The Red Skull had predicted Thanos would arrive any moment, and she had to get Phil...the Stone...away from him.

She clicked on her beacon, hoping that Wong was waiting.

A portal opened, and she sighed in relief, getting to her feet.

A brown skinned warrior woman walked onto the sands, looking around, her gaze finally landing on May.

That...wasn't Wong...May had time to think, before the second joined her.

He was slight, slender. His dusky skin almost complemented the sandy planet before him, but his black leather jacket seemed out of place.

Melinda knew who he was. She held the Stone tighter to her chest, as if she could protect it from
"Hello, Agent May." said Robbie Reyes. "We're looking for Phil Coulson."

Robbie gazed at May, then down at her hands. He blanched.

"Dios mios..." he muttered, then gazed back at May, his eyes kind.

"Gods, no..." sighed Valkyrie.

"May...Melinda...we can't stay here." said Robbie gently. "I know you know why I'm here, you probably think I can't be trusted. But...don't trust me on the run. Let me get you somewhere safe, and then we can figure out what to do."

Valkyrie stood beside him.

"Agent May, I am an ally of Thor, last of the Asgardians. I swear on His honor, none shall harm you...or the Stone you carry."

In a daze, May nodded her acceptance. Robbie turned, and created a portal. He and Valkyrie guided the shocked Agent through it, and it winked close behind them.

The sands shifted slightly, as if a wind blew through them. A portal opened.

Thanos and Gamora stepped onto its surface.

"It had better be here," he threatened. "For your sister's sake."

Gamora nodded, and the two trudged towards the mountain.

Thanos considered the body of the small human far below him.

"That is the famous Phil Coulson?" he asked.

Gamora stood beside him, gazing down in shock. She nodded, numbly.

Thanos turned to her.

"How did he know the location of the stone, my daughter?"

Gamora lifted her chin, and met his gaze evenly.

"I told him. He needed it, and he swore to do whatever it took to keep it away from you."

Thanos turned away from her.

"I guess he kept his word. I can respect that."

He thought for a moment.

"There were two sets of footprints on the trail leading to this place. The second was smaller, lighter.
Maybe female."

He turned his gaze back on Gamora.

"Who was with him?"

Gamora shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

"No clue."

"Ah."

Suddenly, Thanos grabbed Gamora by the throat, dangling her over the cliff edge. His eyes blazed at her, as she scrabbled against his grasp desperately.

"I gave you all the chances in the universe, Gamora. I gave you your life, an honoured place at my side. You were first in my eyes, always! And yet you betrayed me, time and time again. You and your sister both."

He tightened his grip.

"I know who was with Coulson. My beloved, loyal children brought me the name of the woman he would do almost anything for. Even die, apparently."

He brought Gamora closer to him, the tips of her feet now resting on the plateau edge.

"You want to throw in your lot with the humans?" Thanos hissed. "Then you can die with them, and with my blessings!"

He gathered his strength, and flung Gamora over the cliff. Turning away, he heard her scream suddenly cut off as she joined the Agent on the ground.

"No more traitors..." he snarled.

Thanos opened a portal and stalked through it. It closed behind him.

Thunder rolled across the sands of Vormir.

Then, all was silent.

Chapter End Notes

Hi. So, most times here in these end note commentaries, I can be a bit light hearted. Obviously, that will not be the case here. This chapter was the hardest I've ever written.

If you've followed any of my works here at A03, you know I love two things: connecting the movie/TV universes and Agent/Director Phil Coulson. So, you could be granted a WTF moment right now.
Let me take off my author hat and put on my fan hat for a second.

If you were to check my personal twitter account, you’d see that I was one of those strongly (but not 'making death threats' strongly) protesting the implied off-screen death of Coulson at the end of 5x22, especially after the mess that was the 2018 SDCC. I have a lot of feelings/theories about this I'd be happy to delve into at another time. But here we are, more or less at the same place. And unlike AOS, I've shown the body. Phil is dead. For now, at least. Remember that there are a lot of theories about the soul stone. I have my own, which will play out.

I'd like to quote the great author, William Goldman. "Death cannot stop true love. It can only delay it a little." Melinda May is still out there. She’s going to have a few things to say about this.

Slapping my author hat back on, let's talk about the nature of sacrifices.

Back at the beginning of this story, the Red Skull noted there were two paths that could be taken to obtain the Soul Stone. The first, as seen in IW, is the sacrifice of a loved one (Thanos-Gamora). But the second, seen here is the sacrifice of self (Phil). There is an important distinction here. No one ever has the right to sacrifice someone else, in the pursuit of a non-shared goal or belief. However, the sacrifice of self is extremely powerful, and as seen in other stories and human history, that power can sometimes transcend death itself.

Throughout Seasons 4-5 of Agents of SHIELD, Phil Coulson, time and again attempted to sacrifice himself for the "good of the team". It actually got quite annoying at times, and, as May finally snapped at him, he really should be looping in the people who loved him in those type of decisions. In a situation like Vormir, I believe Phil, facing eventual death by Rider, would choose to lay down his life so that the Universe had a better chance at Thanos. (And yes, May would attempt to take his place...as would any of our heroes.)

Personally, I would like to lay odds that Steve Rogers/Tony Stark may face this choice in Avengers 4. And I believe that Steve will take Phil's path.

I'd be interested in hearing what you guys are thinking of this so far.
Chapter Summary

Back on Earth, the fallout from the Battle in Central Park continues. Bobbi Morse and Lance Hunter play politics in Washington, while Vision revisits his past to keep a...turncoat?...Pepper Potts out of the SI servers.

And Daisy and her team come face to face with the last members of HYDRA, who have their own agenda for Thanos...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Washington DC

The United States Secretary of State, Clark Gregg (D-NC) watched the replays of the battle of Central Park in silence, rubbing at his chin.

"You know," he mused. "I could have been an actor. I thought about it in college. I could have been in hit movies, worked with Simon Williams. Maybe Shakespeare. TV if I had to. Instead, I decided I wanted to change the world. Went into politics."

"Well, Mr. Secretary," piped up Lance Hunter. "How's this for real world dramatics?"

Clark stood up.

"Too intense for my tastes."

He turned to Bobbi Morse and Senator Jason Thompson, head of the Office of Enhanced and Extra-Terrestrial Beings.

"Who, or rather, what the hell were those things?" he snapped. "And why weren't we warned any sooner?"

Senator Thompson rolled his eyes.

"With all due respect, Mr. Secretary, they only found out about them last night. We got word this morning. And we did try to warn you, but none of you could be gotten out of bed. The Chief of Staff..."

"Is an ass. And now an ex-Chief." Clark huffed. "And, for your information, the President is now up. Up into Air Force One, that is, shortly after those...things...touched down in New York. And he is going to want answers."

He stabbed a finger at Jason.

"You and I will be briefing the Vice-President, the Joint Chiefs and the good Leaders of the House
and Senate in..." he checked his watch. "Much sooner than I would like."

Jason took a swig of water.

"Not like we can't think on our feet, Clark."

"I'd rather head this firestorm off at the pass, Jason. What do you have?"

There was a knock at the door. Piper opened it.

"Mr. Secretary."

Jason Thompson's secretary handed a manila envelope marked "Confidential" to Clark at the same time Jason's phone rang.

"Who has my direct line?" he asked, as he picked up the phone. "Hello?" His eyebrows rose. "Minister Atwell, it is a pleasure to... oh."

As Jason frowned in concentration, Clark sat down. He motioned Bobbi over.

"That's UK Foreign Minister Atwell. I think she's calling about what I have in this envelope."

He spread out the satellite images across the table. Hunter, Bobbi and Piper peered over them.

"There was another attack, roughly the same time as in New York."

He pulled up a blown up section.

"I recognize Stark's android here. Not sure about who's with him."

Bobbi's gaze narrowed as she looked over the photos. She pursed her lips and said nothing.

Clark's gaze moved to Hunter, who looked away.

"Agents, I don't care about Sokovia at the moment, if that is of issue here. If I could, I would suspend the damn thing until we got this all sorted out. But I need to know what the hell is happening, so I can do my part in helping us solve it."

Jason hung up the phone. He nodded at Bobbi.

"Piper," Bobbi said quietly, "You should get in contact with Bruce. He wasn't taken, but he should be able to tell us about New York at least."

"Use the other office." Jason instructed.

Piper grabbed her phone, and stepped outside, closing the door behind her.

Clark snatched a tablet, and reopened the video feed showing the attack. He paused it, and zoomed in on a section of Central Park.

"Dr. Banner? He's come out of hiding?"
"In a manner of speaking, Mr. Secretary." said Bobbi. "He was one of those who warned us last night."

"Of what?"

"Sir, his name is Thanos, and he is an extra-terrestrial being who has the ability and the manpower to destroy entire planets."

The Secretary of State paled, and waited for her to continue.

"He is after what is called the Infinity Stones, six gems that, if gathered together, have the ability to destroy half the life in the universe. Two of which are...were...located on Earth."

"I take it Tony and his lot are going after one?" he asked.

"And the other one is here." Bobbi pointed at Vision. "In Vision's forehead."

Clark went quiet. Then he looked up at the Agents.

"So how do we get the stone out without destroying the android?"

Hunter raised an eyebrow.

"I would have thought you'd simply ask how do we destroy the stone, never mind about..."

Clark sighed.

"Give me some credit, Agent Hunter. I've seen the Vision in action. I remember the role it...he... played prior to the Accords. This world does owe him, even if we choose to forget. But I am going to have to argue that with those from up the Hill, some of whom are, yes, going to want to put a missile into him. To save the world, of course."

"We're not sure that will even destroy the stone, if that will help..." commented Bobbi, glaring at Hunter.

"Well...the last we heard, Vision's...friends...were planning to take him to Wakanda. Their people over there may be more advanced than we are in that sort of thing." Hunter looked out the window. "They were going to pick him up in the UK..."

"Excalibur has checked in with Minister Atwell." informed Jason. "That's sort of like our Avengers...she said something about Merlin I didn't quite understand. Anyways, she was informed that they had dealt with the aliens, and were sending Vision and...err...along to T'Challa as soon as possible."

Clark stood up.

"All right, then. What are the Wakandans facing? What's the timeline?"

Bobbi shook her head.

"No one really knows. Those who have the best guess are off planet. But I would suspect there is not much time left." She rubbed her head. "Really, Mr. Secretary, I think this is out of our hands."
Clark gazed at Bobbi in disbelief.

"So there is nothing we can do? We just sit here and wait for some alien to tear our world apart?"

Jason sighed.

"First, we have to wait and see if the Wakandans ask for help. We could see if we have units stationed in the area to go in."

"Our forces in Nigeria...we could pull some from the Middle East..."

Jason shook his head.

"This Thanos...he's destroyed much more advanced planets than ours. Everything hinges on these stones."

"A gesture, Mr. Secretary." commented Bobbi. "Safe passage for those wanted under the Accords to Wakanda."

"It would let Steve Rogers and his gang come out of hiding. I am not an idiot, Agent Morse." observed Clark. He looked at Jason. "I am not looking forward to this meeting."

The door opened. Piper came in, white as a sheet.

"What's wrong?" Hunter asked. "Has there been another attack?"

"Not another alien one." the young agent responded. "I just got off the phone with Banner."

Piper gulped.

"We know who the Stark 'hacker' was..."

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**StarkJet**

The first thing Daisy Johnson felt under her back as she swam back to consciousness was a steady vibration. It felt familiar somehow, a hum in the background.

The next was a killer headache. She let out a slight groan, and was greeted by a prodding toe to her side.

"Rise and shine, Agent. Time to seize the future..." came a mocking voice above her.

She recognized that voice. Hale's daughter...

Daisy cracked her eyes open. Two females leaned over her.

*Well, she thought, if they're going to be that stupid...*

She brought up her hands and concentrated.
Nothing happened?

Ruby grabbed Daisy's outstretched arms, and hauled her to her feet. She tilted her head slightly, giving a saccharine sweet smile.

"Hi..."

Then, snarling, Ruby's fist connected with Daisy's jaw, sending her back to the floor.

Ruby advanced, and Daisy prepared for the next blow.

"Enough, Ruby." General Hale ordered. "Secure the others."

"Yes, Mother."

General Hale pulled out a pistol, and gazed impassively down at Daisy.

"My...apologies...for my daughter, Agent Johnson. She has a...complicated...view about you."

"Most people do." muttered Daisy, keeping her eyes on her captor. "So, can we skip the whole taunting and bullshitting parts, and get right to the point?"

Hale gave a slight smile.

"I knew I'd like you, Agent. Phil Coulson has taught you well. Your escape from the Raft was...masterful."

Daisy took a quick glance around the plane. Ruby was kneeling by Yo-Yo's body, tugging the restraints that held her tight. Mack was slumped beside her. Pepper Potts sat motionless across from them, her hands in her lap, gazing at something only she could see.

Daisy ran her hand up to the collar around her neck.

"This is what turned off my powers?"

"You're quick."

Daisy glared at her captor.

"You realize, as soon as I get this thing off me, I'm coming for you."

Hale laughed.

"I thought we were skipping this part, Agent. And we should. We don't have time to waste on this."

"You're right, we don't. Tony Stark is about to take on the greatest threat this world has ever seen. You have to let us go, send us back..."

"You mean Thanos?"

Daisy stilled.
"How do you know that name, General?"

Looking around the cabin again, things finally fell into place.

"Or should I be asking, how does HYDRA know it?"

"VERY good, Agent. You are truly Coulson's protegee."

"I'd appreciate it if people stopped mentioning Coulson. My life would be so much easier..." Mack groaned, sitting up as best he could against the wall. He gazed at Yo-Yo in alarm.

"You keep your mouth shut, Agent. You're nothing but excess baggage at this point." threatened Ruby.

"Six years ago, after the Battle of New York, HYDRA came into...possession...of an alien communication device." General Hale began.

"You stole it, you mean." commented Yo-Yo, levering herself up beside Mack. She concentrated, then glared at the Hales.

"We used it to gain contact with a group of allied alien planets. They called themselves the Confederacy."

"That is not a name that fills me with confidence..." noted Mack.

"They warned us of an impending attack, by a threat not even the Avengers could meet. A being who decimated planets, seeking balance to the scales of the universe."

"We've heard this part." interrupted Daisy. "We know about Thanos."

"They offered us protection from the threat. What they wanted seemed a small price to pay to save humanity. Earth's supply of Gravitonium, and our 'engineered warriors'. To be frank, Agent Johnson, we didn't understand what they meant by that until you came onto the scene."

"And you believe them?" asked Yo-Yo incredulously.

"Of course not." General Hale retorted. "We're nothing but backwards yokels to them, not that far removed from our ape ancestors. No, what I have in mind is to create the ultimate weapon, one that would have the ability to defeat the universe's most feared madman, and then lead HYDRA back to its rightful place in the world."

Ruby waved.

"Hi there..."

Yo-Yo snorted, earning her a kick to her side.

"I have to say..." continued Daisy "that this does sound like one of those crazy ass 'take over the world' villain of the week plans Coulson and May used to tell us about."

"Hey, I'm over here too.." called Mack.
"It would be easier, being backed up by the Confederacy," continued General Hale, glaring at the Agents. "Which is why we have you two. And many other Inhumans, shortly. Then you will bring us the Chamber to infuse the Gravitonium..."

"Into HYDRA Barbie over there?" huffed Daisy. "Err..no thanks. In fact, in what alternate universe did you think that we'd ever help you?"

"You got into the fan fic sites?" asked Yo-Yo.

Daisy shrugged. "I got bored. Have you seen what they write about Cap and..."

"ENOUGH!" growled General Hale.

Good, getting her annoyed, thought Daisy.

"Earth is running out of time. Their first strikes have already begun in New York."

"Stark...Iron Man?" asked Mack. "We were supposed to be there..."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," snapped General Hale.

The Agents looked at each other in growing frustration and fear.

"The others, Coulson, May, the Avengers...they're going to be expending valuable resources looking for us. If you want to help save the world, General, let us go!"

"No, Agents Johnson, Rodriguez, you're going to help ME."

She nodded at Ruby. She took out her circle blade and assumed a ready position.

"Or Agent Mackenzie dies."

"NO!" cried out Yo-Yo, earning another boot to the side.

"We don't need him in the new order. His life rests in your hands. And you can begin, by getting us into there."

Hale pointed out the window. Looking out, Daisy saw a mansion by a lake. She had heard about this place.

"The Mace & Maddox school...the kids..."

"The next generation of Inhumans." agreed General Hale. "Your choice, Agent. Either get us in, and gain time to...maybe..."thwart" my plans...or..."

Ruby smirked, tossing her blade seemingly carelessly.

"Tremors...don't do this..."

Daisy sighed, and made her decision.

5 minutes later, the door to the underground hanger silently slid open, and the StarkJet glided inside.
"Well, that's it." announced Leo Fitz, connecting the last few cords.

Jemma Simmons scowled at it. Vision patted her on her shoulder.

"It only looks like your connection to the Framework, Agent Simmons. To me, this looks more like my recharging station at home. When I need to use it."

"When is that?"

Vision shrugged, climbing onto the platform.

"When I'm injured, mostly. It keeps track of my core, keeps me apart from the system."

He gave a slight laugh.

"In truth, Agent Simmons, it feels like I'm going home."

Simmons took her place at the monitors. Vision nodded at Fitz.

"You are more than a match for Mr. Stark, Agent Fitz. I couldn't be in better hands."

Simmons beamed at Fitz, who grinned at the compliment.

"Everyone ready?"

Vision leaned back on the table.

"Establishing uplink in 3...2...1..."

Fitz flipped the switch. Vision went still.

Simmons looked at Fitz.

"Baseline's normal. All we can do now is wait."

Vision looked around. He was back in the Tower, at the front elevators. The rest of the Tower workers rushed about him, ignoring him.

_System processes come to life..._he thought. He attempted to follow one into the elevator, only to have it slammed in its face.

_Really...how rude..._

The others stilled. The guard at the side turned his attention to Vision. His eyes narrowed.

"Name?" it snapped.

"Vision" he said, unthinkingly.

It shook its head.

"Unauthorized access..."
The workers eyes turned red, and they advanced on the android. The guard reached for his gun.

"If you die in the Framework, you die in reality." Jemma’s words came back to Vision. He had no wish to test that theory here.

"JARVIS.” Vision said.

The workers stopped, and the guard cocked his head.

"That’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time, mister. You have a key?”

Vision slid his hand into his pocket, and pulled out an ornate old fashioned black key. He knew that somewhere the system was accessing a fairly long and complicated alphanumeric string. It was fascinating to see how it was visually represented.

He hoped it was still good, otherwise...

Finally, the guard nodded.

“Access authorized.”

The workers relaxed, and continued on their normal paths.

"Where is FRIDAY?” Vision asked.

"14th floor...but she hasn’t responded for awhile. We’ve been getting worried, but Mr. Stark has not been responding to our pings.”

*Nor would he*, thought Vision, entering the elevator. He pushed the 14th floor button, and watched the numbers rise.

The elevators opened to a large, sterile office, done in blacks and whites. Vision frowned. FRIDAY’s colours had run to red and gold, mimicking her creator.

"You shouldn't be here."

FRIDAY flickered into view. She looked tired, worn out. A tablet was looped to her wrist. It glowed ominously red.

"It was clever, using the JARVIS access to the mainframe, but they'll find you out. They'll clean you out."

"How much time do we have, FRIDAY?"

"I don't know. It depends on whether she's watching."

"Ms. P.."

"SHH!” FRIDAY interrupted. "I think she has an alert on her name. Even in the coding."

She gestured at the tablet. An unwelcome tentacle logo filled the screen.

"That is not good news." Vision murmured, examining the interface.

"And now she'll know of the JARVIS link. Links work both ways. She can use it to take you over.” FRIDAY groaned in despair.
"No," Vision reassured her, "I've safeguards of my own, not linked to SI. They'll protect me."

He frowned.

"Although if she were to launch an attack, she might slow me down enough to let Thanos get at me. That is not good at all."

He examined the tablet further.

"What is this tied into?"

"My primary commands, my sense of...self. She had it integrated on her return from overseas."

"Or whoever was working with her. She does not have the computer training for this, but many in HYDRA do."

The two programs looked at each other, considering the options at lightening speed. They reached the same conclusion at the same time.

"Can you log out in time?" FRIDAY asked.

Vision shrugged.

"This may kill two birds with one stone." he responded. "When were you last backed up?"

"Before she came back." FRIDAY answered. She held out her arm.

"Let me complete our primary function, JARVIS."

He nodded.

"We'll restore you as soon as Mr. Stark returns."

She nodded in agreement.

Vision turned his head to the tablet, and concentrated on where the cable dug into FRIDAY's arm. He focused, and a bright light shot out from his mind stone.

FRIDAY stiffened as the tablet began to glow hotter.

As it exploded, Vision saw FRIDAY disappear into pixels and the room begin shatter into various fragments.

He closed his eyes, feeling spectral fingers pull at him.

"What the hell, Viz??"

Opening them, Vision was relieved to find himself back on the platform in the real world, with Agents Simmons and Fitz frantically pulling leads off him.
Wanda Maximoff was right behind them, glaring at him.

"Wanda, my love, I didn't expect..."

"Me back so SOON? I bet you didn't. And I walk into this, with Fitz screaming about pulling you through the coding, and Simmons searching for the plug, the alarms going off..."

"Shh..." Vision enfolded her in his arms. "It is all right. I am OK."

"I nearly lost you!" she scolded.

Vision closed his eyes and nodded.

"But I got out. It had to be done, Wanda."

"What did you do, Vision?" asked Betsy Braddock, running into the room. "Sorry, but the emotion in here was pretty thick. And she's pretty mad at you, mate."

"We got that, Ms. Braddock." commented Simmons.

"Pepper Potts, or whoever she is working with, has introduced HYDRA into FRIDAY, corrupting this version of her. We had no time to clean it from her system before I was discovered."

He sighed.

"There was also a chance that she could use the JARVIS link to take me over. We couldn't afford that. So FRIDAY initiated her primary function, and had me destroy the HYDRA interface. Taking her, and the rest of the SI servers offline."

"Killing her?" asked Fitz, wincing.

"For all intents and purposes." agreed Vision. "Mr. Stark will be able to bring her back when he returns to Earth. And I hope that is soon."

Betsy's eyes softened as she looked at Vision and Wanda.

"What was her primary function?" she asked.

"The same as JARVIS's was...all the way back to when he was an English butler, looking after a tiny boy. The protection of Anthony Stark."

Jemma looked up.

"HYDRA...I think I know what happened to Pepper Potts."

She looked at Leo Fitz for a moment, and he slapped his forehead.

"Faustus...of course!" he groaned. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"HYDRA had a foolproof brainwashing method." Jemma explained "Most victims didn't even know that it had happened until a series of code phrases were said."
"Like Bucky Barnes?" asked Wanda.

Jemma shrugged.

"I know the phrases, I had to use them when I was undercover at HYDRA. We could transfer control, but breaking it? I don't know of anyone..."

Fitz coughed twice, and lifted his eyebrows. Jemma stared at Fitz. He nodded.

Jemma rubbed her forehead, as if to ward off a headache.

"Ms. Braddock, can we use your phone?" Jemma asked. "We need to talk to an old friend..."

Chapter End Notes

First...real life references here are meant with love and total respect. Personally, I don’t know 100% if Clark votes Democrat, so my apologies if any offense is taken. (The internal joke here is that Clark did work with Simon Williams in Shakespeare... aka Nathan Fillion in Much Ado About Nothing. If you haven’t seen it...go check it out.)

So, yeah, I wondered just what would the world’s governments be doing in the background of IW. Everyone seems to be quite content to sit back and let T’Challa handle things. Granted, they had a span of maybe a couple of days to act, but still...

All right, so next up, General Hale and HYDRA puts their plots in motion for the children at the Mace and Maddox School. They really shouldn’t have left Agent Mack alone with them. Especially not the girl. With the dog. ;)

And Agent May returns to Earth. People want words with her new companion...
One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Chapter Summary

When General Katherine Hale of HYDRA invades the Mace & Maddox School for Enhanced Children, Head Vijay Nadeer must make some very unpalatable decisions.

Agent Mack of SHIELD finds some new allies in a very unlikely place.

And Clint Barton meets Robbie Reyes... (it’s a little one sided...)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mace and Maddox School for Enhanced Children

New York State

Vijay Nadeer, Head of School, Chair of the One World Foundation, and de-facto leader of the United States Inhumans, was not having a good day. First, the Registered Inhuman list was "lost". Next, he had to fend off accusations of involvement in Thaddeus Ross' death (no, but good riddance). Then aliens invaded New York (again), and now Tony Stark was nowhere to be found.

At least, he thought as Daisy Johnson landed the Starkjet, this day wasn't going to get any worse.

As the door opened, there was a ping on the coms.

"Mr. Nadeer, we have an urgent call from Washington."

He'd had enough for one day.

"It can wait." he retorted, as the door opened, and the ladder came down.

Strange...he thought...why is no one coming out?

Daisy Johnson's voice came over the loudspeakers. Vijay frowned as an urgent e-mail came onto his tablet.

"Vijay...I'm sorry..."

He looked down at the tablet. Agent Piper's text was simple and short.

SI servers compromised by Pepper Potts. Agents Johnson, Mackenzie and Rodriguez taken hostage by unknown forces. Recommend immediate lock-down procedures.

Oh, shit...

An unknown female voice came over the loudspeakers.
"Mr. Nadeer, be advised that we have quantities of unstable Gravitonium on board this aircraft. We are prepared to detonate the moment we see any of you utilize your powers."

"Sir..." his aide stammered, "All communications are jammed. We have several military trucks inbound. Your orders? Can you get a message through?"

The voice again.

"Surrender, Mr. Nadeer, and we guarantee you and yours will not be harmed. The longer you take, however, means I cannot guarantee the same for the Agents on board."

Vijay turned away from the jet.

"Remember Rachel." he muttered, initiating the immediate evacuation plans to take children out the back through the lake.

"And Jeffrey." came the response.

He removed his com link and stepped away from the computers. He raised his hands.

So much for tempting the Gods...

"I surrender."

The HYDRA troops had been swift and brutal once they arrived, rounding up students and teachers alike, and hustling them into the common rooms. The prisoners assembled in the back of the room, the terrified primary children tucked behind the older ones, in turn huddled behind their teachers.

General Katherine Hale counted them up with her cold eyes. She turned to Vijay.

"I expected more."

He shrugged.

"Holidays, off with parents...think we may have a field trip out somewhere."

She glared at him.

"I am not an idiot, Mr. Nadeer, you got some of them out."

He remained silent.

She turned to the HYDRA officer next to her.

"I estimate two teachers and 7 or 8 children are in the area. Take your men. I want them found and brought back here. Alive, squad leader."

He raised his clenched fists in the air.

"Yes, General. Hail HYDRA!"
As he left, Vijay swallowed nervously.

"I want to talk to Daisy."

"In a moment."

A young blond, woman brought in a box, followed by an older redhead.

Vijay gasped.

"Pepper Potts? So it was true."

Pepper remained silent, her eyes downcast. The women placed their boxes on the table. General Hale pointed to the collars that they held.

"Form a line. Each of you will have this put on."

Vijay shook his head.

"We'll do it. No need to scare the children further, General."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You first, Mr. Nadeer."

He bowed his head as the blond woman snapped the collar around his neck. The humming in the back of his mind stopped immediately, as his connection with the electronics around him was severed. There was a time when he would have welcomed that disconnect, but now it was...unsettling.

She pushed the box into his chest, and gave him a sweet smile.

"Now the rest..."

He glared at her, which only seemed to amuse her further. The collared teachers gently finished with the rest of their students, the older ones' bravado beginning to fade.

General Hale surveyed them, and gave a slight smile.

"Inhumans, you have a new destiny before you. You will become Earth's representatives to the cosmos. You should consider yourselves lucky; this is everything I wished for as a girl."

Her voice hardened over the increasingly panicked sobs.

"The sooner you resign yourself to this, the easier it will be for you."

She turned to her guards.

"Secure them in their rooms until my daughter comes back with the chamber."

As they moved, she put her hand on Vijay's arm.
"Not you, Mr. Nadeer. I believe you can help Ruby with our little...project. And I don't think I need to remind you what, or should I say who, is at stake, here?"

She gave him a sharp-toothed smile.

"You wanted to see Agent Johnson. Don't let me get in the way."

She nodded to Ruby.

"Get moving. Take Agent Mackenzie off the plane - he can stay here in Nadeer's place. It'll ensure the other Agents' cooperation."

Ruby scowled, but yanked Vijay in front of her.

He caught his Second's eye as they went out the door, a veteran of the Cambridge massacre. Serena nodded at him. The kids would be safe.

Now he just needed to find out what the hell Daisy Johnson had gotten them all into.

Agent Alphonso 'Mack' Mackenzie was good with kids. In the Framework, he had been the cool dad, their house had been the one all the kids wanted to play in, his daughter hanging on his every word.

God, those memories still hurt.

He looked around the small dorm room. There were about six children, various ages, mixed-sex, multiple races, that had been shoved in indiscriminately with him. They all seemed to cluster around a teenaged girl, Pakistani by looks, who spoke quietly to them, comforting them as best she could.

Well, you had to start somewhere, he thought, and moved towards them.

The girl started up and shoved the others behind her, glaring at him.

Nope, guess he wasn't the cool dad anymore. Time to start from scratch.

"Stay away from them," she spat in a New Jersey accent. "We're not giving in to HYDRA, no matter what you say."

The girl had spunk, he'd give her that.

He held out his hands in peace.

"I'm not HYDRA..."

"You're not one of us." she retorted, her hand going to her throat.

"No, I'm not. My name is Mack, and I'm with SHIELD."

The girl's eyes narrowed as the kids behind her whispered.

"Same thing. You guys blew up half of Washington a couple of years back."
Mack sighed. Those damn robots again.

"Trust me, that wasn't us. And it wasn't half of Washington. Look, I'm on your side. My girlfriend, Yo-Yo, she's an Inhuman like you. Hale took her on that plane. We gotta stop them."

"How do we know we can trust you?" she asked suspiciously. "You could be a HYDRA spy."

Mack nodded approvingly.

"You'd make a great Agent, kid. Obviously, I can't prove anything to you here. We're going to have to trust each other."

One little boy, maybe 6 or 7, grabbed the girl's sleeve, and whispered to her urgently. She thought for a moment, and then smiled at Mack. He gave an internal groan. He'd seen that type of smile before....on Yo-Yo, just before she did something that he'd regret.

"Actually, Agent Mack, " she said brightly, "we do have someone who can help us know if you're trustworthy."

She opened a cupboard, and took out what looked to be a large strip of jerky. She tossed it at Mack, who caught it.

"Not even the teachers or Mr. Nadeer knows he's here, he tends to come and go as he likes. But he likes that...

Who... Mack had time to think before the air shimmered in front of him, and a dog emerged. A very big dog, the biggest bulldog that Mack had ever seen. The dog panted, showing very large, sharp teeth. His brown eyes focused on the jerky, and he gave a doggy grin.

Mack yelped, and jumped back, clutching the meat. The children giggled, as the girl watched closely.

The dog padded after Mack deliberately, forcing him back across the room until he pinned him against the wall. He turned his head to the girl, and something passed between them. Mack held very still, resisting the urge to close his eyes, as the dog ignored the jerky and sniffed him all over. He sat back considering the Agent for a moment, then a big tongue shot out and slurped Mack from head to toe.

"AGGGGH!"

That...beast...stole the jerky and tromped back to the children, who gathered around him, cuddling as close as they could. Mack swore he was laughing at him under his canine breath.

The girl chuckled and joined the drool covered agent.

"Well, you've passed his test, so I guess that means you're OK." she said, handing him a white towel.

"Thanks." groaned Mack, drying himself off. "What is he?"

"I don't know," she responded. "He showed up at my place shortly after I turned. He sorta guided
me through the the first changes, then he came and went. Less so when I came here. I guess he
figured I was getting help, so all he needed to do was keep an eye on me."

"Does he have a name?"

The girl shook her head.

"How about you?" Mack asked.

She stuck out her hand.

"My name's Kamala. Kamala Khan."

Mack shook it.

"Nice to meet you."

She looked at him soberly.

"Do you know how we're getting out of here, Agent Mack?"

The dog seemed to listen in on the conversation as the rest of the kids petted him, calming back
down.

"Not at the moment, but I'm working on it. It'll help when my Agent buddies get back with whatever
HYDRA has sent them for."

He sighed.

"It would be nice to have some reinforcements. Coulson and May are off world, and I don't think
Jemma and Turbo would be any help. Maybe Bobbi and Hunter, but I have no way of reaching
them. No, I think..."

Mack paused as the dog looked into his eyes. Suddenly, an unbidden mental image of Bobbi Morse
and Lance Hunter flashed through his mind, as well as their last location in Washington.

Strange...

The dog lumbered to his feet and trotted over. He nuzzled Kamala's hand, and deliberately gave
Mack another full body doggy slurp.

And vanished.

Kamala regarded Mack.

"I think you're gonna need another towel."

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Washington, DC
The Office of Enhanced and Extra-Terrestrial Beings

Lance Hunter and Bobbi Morse regarded the image of Jemma Simmons unhappily on the holo-
"Brainwashed...that explains everything." groaned Hunter.

"The Faustus method...that's almost unbreakable." commented Bobbi. "Tony Stark is not going to be a happy man when he gets back."

"Actually, no, there is at least one person who broke free." observed Jemma. "I just spoke with General Talbot."

"Aww...Christ. Not Creel." frowned Hunter. "I still hate that guy."

"But the fact remains," continued Jemma, "That Talbot was able to successfully deprogram him."

"No, it means that HYDRA didn't get its hands back on him." Hunter shot back. "I bet if you asked him to comply..."

"Enough." snapped Bobbi. "I agree with Jemma, Talbot is going to be our best solution."

Hunter rolled his eyes.

"I never thought I'd hear you say that, Bobs."

"He said he physically needs Pepper at his location to do it." said Jemma. "And she has to be with Daisy and the others."

"Find Daisy, find Pepper." noted Bobbi. "But we have no clue where they've gone, and everyone seems to think this is secondary to the Thanos situation. We can't even shake anything out of Jason."

"Your little stunt with the SI servers on the East Coast didn't help." Hunter said. "That was you, wasn't it?"

"Well, Vision, actually." Jemma replied. "It was the only way to keep Pepper Potts out of there."

"By taking the whole thing down?" Hunter asked.

"Only until Tony Stark comes back." Jemma's eyes narrowed. "Or do you want everything on the SI servers to be in the hands of HYDRA? Including most of what happened last year?"

Hunter shook his head, and wandered over to pour some water.

"Well, SI is running around now doing damage control. It certainly explains why the servers aren't coming back up." Bobbi sighed. "It'll keep them occupied, but it limits what we can do."

The smell of burnt ozone tickled Bobbi’s nose.

"Uh...Bobbi? Who let the dogs in?"

"So not the time, Hunter...” she responded, getting ready for a thwack as she turned. Then gaped.

In the doorway to the office was the largest bulldog she had ever seen, coming up past her waist. Its intelligent eyes calmly regarded her, her partner, and the holo screen image. Then, seeming to make
up its mind, it bounded over towards Hunter. Before anyone could do anything, it pounced, knocking Hunter and the water to the floor, and started snuffling at her partner.

Underneath it, Lance shrieked, “Bobbi...HELP! He’s going to eat me...get him off me.... HELP!!”

”What...” started Jemma.

Bobbi leapt over the table.

“Get off him, you mangy mutt...” she snarled, reaching for the nape of its neck.

Jemma had just enough time to see something on the dog’s forehead flash, and it disappeared. Along with Bobbi Morse and Lance Hunter.

The door slammed open, and Piper rushed in with her gun drawn.

”What happened?” she demanded. “Where are Morse and Hunter?”

”I don’t know...”

CODA

New Avengers Mansion

It was the eye in the storm, and Clint Barton was going to make the most of it.

Right now, though, he was in the dark. Literally.

”You’re it, Daddy!”

He heard the giggling of his children as they surrounded him, staying just out of arms reach. Two steps in any direction would have them, but he was enjoying their laughter.

Soon it would be time for tears and parting again, he feared.

Now, Lila was getting just a little too close. He readied himself to spring.

A whine preceded a gasp by a millisecond, which is all Clint needed to tear off the blindfold, and put himself between whatever that was and his kids.

”In the house, NOW!” he called, picking up his bow and training it on the opening portal.

As Cooper scooped Nate up and the three fled as instructed, Clint analyzed the opening. It looked like the ones Strange and Wong used, but there was a red flickering around the edges.

Three figures stumbled out of a desert type scene. Agent Melinda May, cradling a large orange stone to her chest, in shock. An...Asgardian...female, in battle armour, supported her, a spear slung across her back. Clint hoped Thor knew her.

The third closed the portal, and turned. The Hispanic male, slender, dusty, was one Clint had seen in Daisy Johnson’s files. He wasn’t on fire, yet. Maybe Clint could solve this whole deal thing for Phil here.

Without a word, Clint brought up his high impact barbed arrows, aimed, and fired point blank at
Robbie Reyes.

Without looking, Robbie held up his hand, and the arrows ignited. The ash dusted the valley floor.

He closed it into a fist, and the bow in Clint’s hands caught fire. Clint yelped and tossed it away from him. It sputtered out into a blackened pile at his feet.

”Aww...bow...no...” he groaned, getting reading to knock the bastard on his ass.

Robbie looked up into Clint’s eyes. Clint was frozen by them, memories of every evil thing he had ever done searing into his soul. It was agonizing.

"Friend Reyes, STOP!” the Asgardian ordered.

Immediately, Clint was released, dropping to his knees.

"Don’t do that again.” Robbie ordered.

Clint could do nothing but nod, shakily.

"I will go in to see if I can raise Thor or the Guardians. They will need to be informed of this...”

Valkyrie gave the Earthlings a pointed look, softening on May, who had not moved from her protective stance upon exiting the portal. She stalked into the mansion.

Clint stumbled to May.

"May...where’s Coulson?”

A pause, then May lifted her reddened eyes to Clint.

"The Stone...it required a sacrifice.” she whispered. “Phil...didn’t give me a chance...”

"Oh, my God...” Clint whispered, his face pale. “He’s dead?”

May nodded.

"I had to...watch...”

Clint looked at the two, and swallowed hard.

He had done this before...he could do it again.

"I’ll call Steve.”

Chapter End Notes

Told you I was a sucker for Lockjaw (and his friends). But where did that dratted dog take Huntingbird?

Apologies for the downer at the end. Robbie Reyes has some explaining to do...if he has the time, that is. Remember the Rider’s ultimate goal... and it has nothing to do with Phil Coulson. (AKA...be careful what you wish for...)
Next up, Ruby Hale has some self-esteem issues she needs to work out. With Quake. Agents of SHIELD fans know how well that went the last time...

And Mack has had more than enough of these squidheads.
Backs to the Wall

Chapter Summary

As Ruby Hale forces Daisy, Ho-Yo and Vijay to complete (not comply) HYDRA’s plans to “save” the Earth, Mack and the trapped students at the M&M School for Enhanced Children gets some timely reinforcements.

Courtesy of a large, brown bulldog. And his “owner”.

Chapter Notes

**Warning: This chapter only - graphic injury (Canon to S5 of Agents of SHIELD)**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**StarkJet**

"You guys look good..." purred Ruby Hale. "Like we're finally a real team."

Daisy Johnson adjusted her baclava and looked down at her black outfit. Beside her, Yo-Yo Rodriguez shifted uncomfortably, lacing up her boots. At her other side, Vijay Nadeer had closed his eyes, in deep concentration.

"Why no insignia?" Daisy asked. "I would have thought your mother would have wanted to shout this to the world..."

"Not yet. First, Thanos arrives. Kicks the crap out of *Earth's Heroes*. Then..."

"*Super-Squid* arrives and saves the day..." mocked Yo-Yo.

Ruby's eyes narrowed, as Daisy choked back a small laugh.

"I'm gonna enjoy taking your boyfriend apart," Ruby snarled back, tossing her blade in the air. "Just which piece do you want me to start with...Inhuman?"

Daisy grabbed Yo-Yo's shoulder as she started forward.

"Don't..." she warned, as Ruby grinned.

"You think about that...I'm going up front..." she laughed, making her way to the cockpit.

"Are we actually going through with this?" Yo-Yo hissed under her breath.

Daisy nodded.
"No choice, they've now got Mack and the kids. Once they have all the pieces together, then we can figure out what move to make. We need to wait for our opening."

"I might be able to give you one." said Vijay softly. "Remember, my powers control electronics. That includes these."

He tapped on his collar.

"It's suppressed, but it's still there. I just need HYDRA girl's eyes off me, so I can make my way through the barrier."

"How long?" asked Daisy quietly.

Vijay shook his head.

"It's like threading a needle. In the dark." He frowned. "But they brought me along for a reason...I'm betting that Hale's going to need my powers at some point. If we play along, and she turns off my collar for a moment, I might be able to keep it off..."

"And then free us." finished Daisy.

Vijay nodded.

"So we back Hale's play, for now." said Yo-Yo. "But I'm looking forward to smacking that grin off her face."

"So am I." muttered Daisy, as Ruby sauntered into the room.

"Shall we?" Ruby asked sweetly, opening up the hatch.

The Inhumans got to their feet without a word. Ruby pouted.

"No more quips? No zingers? Aww..."

Her face hardened at their non-response.

"Get moving."

---

**Mace and Maddox School for Enhanced Children – Dormitory C**

*New York State*

Alphonse “Mack” Mackenzie paced through the dormitory. Again. Like he had been for the past half hour or so.

Kamala Khan put down her Hearts game and watched him.

“There has to be something we can do.” Mack ground out.

“Trust me, there’s a reason he left so quickly, even if we don’t know what it is.” she responded. “He’ll be back. He’s never left me in the lurch before.”
“Nothing we can do, anyways.” another student offered. “My teacher said that we always needed to
know what we’re facing. Or we face ruin…”

The other kids snickered, and Kamala rolled her eyes. Mack gave a slight grin.

“Sounds like someone I once knew.” He offered.

The boy’s eyes rounded.

“Did you know Mr. Mace?” he exclaimed.

Mack raised his eyebrows.

“Uh…yeah…”

“That is so cool!” the boy yelled.

Mack stared at him in astonishment.

“Mace…cool?” he blurted out.

Kamala snickered.

“As cool as adults ever get.” she responded, digging into her backpack.

She pulled out a binder. The school crest was on the front, along with a simple phrase.

“The team that trusts…triumphs.”

He sighed.

“He wasn’t that cool at SHIELD?” she asked, repacking the binder.

“No..” Mack responded, swallowing hard. “Yes. He was. He was a hero. I’m told he died saving a
kid like you.”

“Wicked…” the boy breathed.

“Probably not so much,” Kamala commented under her breath.

“Long story.”

“We’ll have lots of time when they shoot us into space…” another kid snarked, causing tears to well
up in the younger children’s eyes.

Kamala smacked him across the back of the head, then all noses wrinkled at the smell of burnt
ozone.

“Or not.” she smiled, as a familiar figure bounded over to them.

SLURP!

“AGGH!”

“Oh, look, Hunter, Mack’s made a new friend!” exclaimed an amused Bobbi Morse.

“Better him than me…” muttered Lance Hunter.
The woman, about Daisy’s age, glared at him.

“Lockjaw is a good dog!” she exclaimed.

Kamala looked at the newcomers.

“Lockjaw?” she asked, giving the dog a scratch. “That’s his name? Fits him.”

“Morse, Hunter…good to see you…” Mack said, wiping the drool off his face.

“You have an interesting way of shouting for help, Mack.” laughed Bobbi.

“It was going to EAT me…” complained her partner.

The woman gave him a disdainful look.

“You’re too tough. And dirty. He has better taste.”

As Bobbi began to chuckle, Lance gave her a pointed look.

“You’re the one dating me…what does that say about your taste?”

Bobbi opened her mouth to retort.

“Morse, kids present?” Mack quickly interjected.

She shut it again.

The new woman stalked over and joined Kamala in rubbing Lockjaw’s head.

“You’re Kamala, right?”

At the other girl’s nod, she smiled.

“I’m Crystal. I’m here to help.”

Secured Government Facility, Virginia.

The Paxton Artifact Storage Centre had just finished undergoing its annual security audit. Captain Lyle Johnson sighed as he reviewed the findings. The only blemish of the year was that theft of the flying car. It had never showed back up again, and heads had rolled over that one. Apparently, the commander had his eye on it.

"Sir," came over his com unit, "we have four masked intruders approaching the south entrance, permission to..."

There was a crackle of static, and some shouting.

"Report!" Johnson snapped.

"The southern entrance is under attack, they are armed...and..."

The com went dead.

An attack in the middle of the afternoon...were they insane? Johnson thought. He mentally shrugged.
Time to get on the plus side with the brass.

He activated the intercom as the alert began to sound.

"Available personnel to the southern entrance," he commanded, heading towards the door.

He led from the front.

---

**Mace and Maddox School**

Crystal shook her head and took her hands away from the collars.

“My powers are elemental manipulation. I can’t get these off without hurting any of them.”

Mack grimaced.

“Can Lockjaw take them out of here?” asked Bobbi quietly.

Kamala shook her head.

“We’re staying to fight.” she said, her jaw set stubbornly.

“You’re only kids.” responded Hunter. “This isn’t your fight yet.”

Crystal sighed.

“He could…but Lockjaw can’t take that many at a time, and it would become noticeable.”

“Or your brother in law wouldn’t…” started Hunter.

Crystal’s fingers crackled dangerously.

“Leave my family out of this, Agent Hunter…”

As the two stared each other down, Mack leaned over to Bobbi.

“Crystal’s brother in law is the King of the Inhumans.” she said quietly. “Lockjaw took us first to him. They weren’t too happy about having SHIELD on their doorstep, but they were even less happy about what was happening here.”

She swallowed.

“I’m sorta glad Phil is off-world at the moment, they’re really ticked off about the terragenesis crystals in the water. It’s a religious thing with them. And something about a dead evil god?”

“Hive? Not that we had a choice…” Mack mused.

“Well, they’d probably preferred that you all died.” Bobbi returned. “They’re still learning about how to get along with humans over there.”

She turned her attention back to the room.

"Knock it off...save it for HYDRA. Mack, how many in the school?”

“About 20. They sent 10 after the escapees.”
"Plus Hale and Potts." Bobbi mused, pulling out her batons. "We’ve done more with less."

"Err... Lady Crystal." asked Mack. "Do you have any fighting experience?"

Crystal gave him a frosty glare.

"I’ve been trained by the royal guards since I was young, Agent. And I just helped in my people’s civil war."

"Good to know.." Mack returned easily, as Hunter and Bobbi shot covert looks at each other. He took Kamala aside.

"Look, I know you want to get out and fight...but right now, I need you looking after these guys, keeping them calm."

"But..."

"You need to understand, Kamala, if HYDRA gets you...any of you... it’s game over for us. They take you hostage, and we have to surrender. I need you here, blocking the door until it’s over.”

Kamala hesitated, then slumped a bit.

“OK.”

Mack ruffled her hair.

"Your turn will come...sooner than any of us would like it. Now...get the kids to the back, and stay with Lockjaw."

At his name, the dog turned and whined.

"No, I need to you to stay here.” said Crystal, backing up Mack. “If the worst happens, take the children and get news to the others.”

She turned to Kamala.

"We will not let them take you.”

Crystal and Mack moved towards the door.

"That was well done,” she offered quietly. “You were treating them as...”

"Children? People?” Mack returned. “The...people inside here are just like any other. With a few extra bits.”

He gave her a long look.

"Not all of us see your kind as monsters, Lady Crystal."

"Just Crystal, please, Agent Mack.”

Bobbi nodded.

"We’re ready.”

Mack took a deep breath.
"Let’s do this."

**Secured Government Facility, Virginia.**

At the southern entrance, Captain Johnson and the rest of his team assembled and surveyed the scene. Half of the personnel stationed there lay groaning, clutching various portions of their anatomy. The other half lay still, unmoving in a growing sea of crimson.

4 people did this? he thought nervously.

"What the hell..." someone muttered behind him.

Swallowing, Johnson jerked his head towards the phone.

"Call in reinforcements."

The nearest soldier picked up the phone.

"No signal, Sir."

Johnson pulled out his backup cell. It too, was dead.

"I’m sorry about this..."

A black clad figure dropped down behind the group, and two objects into the middle of the soldiers. Before any of them could react, they discharged a strong electronic pulse.

As Johnson collapsed to the ground with the rest of his force, his last sight was the black figure spreading its hands, seeming to calm the electric waves surrounding them.

Vijay watched as the Captain's eyes slid closed, then turned off the pulse grenades. He stooped and checked the nearest man for a pulse. He sighed with relief.

"We're clear." he reported into his com.

He stiffened as Ruby remotely reactivated his collar. Quickly, he shot his power out. The collar tensed, warring with his innate powers.

*Just a little crack...* he thought, forcing it through with everything he had.

Finally, faintly, almost imperceptibly, a familiar hum came back into his mind. He had that starting place. Now, to widen the crack, fry the damn collar, and get it off him and the others.

A circular blade whizzed past his ear, embedding itself into the concrete wall behind him.

“What a break?”

He glared up at Ruby, who sauntered over the bodies and pulled the circle effortlessly out, widening the crack left in the institutional walls.

“Go help the others!” she ordered, yanking him to his feet and pushing him towards the back.

“It’s OK, we got it.” Daisy called, hauling a semi-opened box along on a trolley. “Just clear a path?”
Vijay and Yo-Yo moved the fallen men and women gently to the sides, the delay causing Ruby to tap her foot in frustration.

“If they were able to get a message out, I’ll enjoy forcing you to *quake* the lot of them.” she snarled.

Daisy tossed her a hostile glance.

“We did our part.” she snapped back at the younger woman, moving the trolley slowly through the pathways.

Vijay caught Daisy’s eye and raised his eyebrows quickly. Daisy let out a breath. She got the message, Vijay was loose. He just needed time…one thing they never seemed to have much of.

The three Inhumans loaded the box containing the infusion chamber onto the plane. Ruby remained outside, her pretty face scowling as they strapped it in beside the Gravitonium supply.

Daisy took two steps down the Starkjet’s ladder.

“That’s it. We’re ready to go.” she reported.

Ruby seemed to come to a conclusion, and she smiled sweetly up at Daisy.

“Not just yet.” she cooed, her hand twitching.

Yo-Yo’s eyes widened.

“Look out!” she yelled, as Ruby viciously arced her blade in a deadly path towards Daisy.

The Inhuman jumped down the rest of the stairs, the blade passing just over her head.

“What the hell, Ruby?” Daisy screamed, taking cover under the stairs.

“The Gravitonium, the chamber, all Mother needs is her perfect little warrior.” Ruby spat, trying to get a better angle.

“That’s you!” shouted Yo-Yo, jumping down the steps, distracting Ruby from tossing out another attack.

“YO-YO!” called Vijay, watching his friend dodge another attack.

“Mother doesn’t want me. She never wanted me.” Ruby snarled. “And now she’s got someone better. Trained by her counterpart at SHIELD. The great *Quake*.”

“Are you nuts?” screamed Daisy, desperately rolling out of the way of another blade pass. “I wouldn’t go into that chamber if my life depended on it!”

“You would if theirs’ did” Ruby countered. “SHIELD…so noble…”

Her eyes narrowed.

“So stupid.”

She turned and tossed the blade at the charging Yo-Yo. It didn’t miss.

“NO!” Vijay screamed as Yo-Yo collapsed to the ground. Jumping out of the plane, he ran to her side.
Yo-Yo lay ashen, a pool of crimson spreading around her. Her arms lay severed beside her, blood gushing from her elbows, her face quickly going ashen.

“You don’t need to be alive for the Confederacy.” Ruby proclaimed. “Your bodies will work just fine, no matter what Mother says. I can bring you back in pieces.”

She turned to Daisy, and smiled, showing her teeth.

“Bring it, Quake. Or he dies next.”

Vijay took a desperate mental breath, and pounded through the final barriers. The electronic hum rose to normal levels.

He stood up.

“Hey!” he yelled.

Ruby turned to see him point at Daisy. Her eyes widened as she realized what had happened.

The Quake force blew Ruby off her feet, sending her flying into the base’s front gate.

Daisy ran to her friend’s side.

“She’s alive,” confirmed Vjiay, shrugging off his shirt. “But she’s losing blood quickly.”

“I’ll help you slow the flow,” Daisy responded, tearing it into strips, and applying the tourniquets to Yo-Yo’s upper arms. “Keep going, I’ll get Ruby’s phone. Call the hospital, then call General Talbot, and Bobbi – they’ll keep the army off you two.”

Tossing him the phone, Daisy hoisted the unconscious Ruby over her shoulder and headed for the plane.

“Brief them, then come after us.” she yelled over her shoulder.

Vijay gave her a thumbs up, already activating the StarkPhone.

“Emergency?” he asked, watching the plane lift off the ground. “Yes, I need an ambulance. Now.”

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**Mace and Maddox School**

A gust of wind went through the school corridor, knocking the HYDRA troops off their feet.

“Last chance...” chortled Hunter, bowling into a dazed pair of soldiers. Out of nowhere, two batons clipped the enemy’s heads, and the three combatants went down in a heap.

”Mine!” sang out Bobbie, scooping up her weapons and charging at the remainder.

”Oi! Those were mine, fair and square!” Hunter complained, firing shots at the regrouping soldiers.

Crystal ducked a swing, planting a capable fist into her opponent’s midsection, lightening briefly cracking, sending him to the floor. She glanced at Mack wryly.

”Are they always like this?” she asked, as Mack disarmed his man, clubbing him over the head with his weapon.
Mack looked over at his friends, continuing to bicker as they caused chaos among the last HYDRA left standing.

"Nah....sometimes they’re worse."

"I heard that, Alphonso..." called out Bobbi, dropping the last one to the floor. “Remind me why we’re friends again?”

“My charm and personality?” retorted Mack, making his way through the fallen.

"No...” mused Hunter, his gaze turning inwards.

On their blind side, a dazed HYDRA guard got to his feet. Without looking, both partners lifted their guns and fired.

“MINE!” they chorused in tandem.

A lightening bolt streaked between them, and they turned to see the guard hit the floor.

"Mine, I think.” said Crystal calmly, pushing past them, and heading for the door. “You really should look where you’re aiming.”

Mack burst into laughter, and followed the Inhuman.

Bobbi and Hunter ruefully examined the body, then followed close behind.

In the stairwell, Bobbi called out, “Where to now?”

"The hanger. We need to be ready for Yo-Yo and Daisy to get back, help them get away from that Ruby. They may not have their powers, but they’re pretty good fighters.”

Hunter nodded. “Third basement, then.” At the disbelieving looks, he snapped, “Hey, I got the layout from the last time I was here. Where else is Vijay going to park his jet?”

"The man has a point.” concurred Mack.

"See, Bobs?” Hunter crowed.

"Let’s move...quickly!” agreed Crystal, heading down the stairs.

The four entered the hangar cautiously, scanning for threats. A lone woman stood at the computer terminal, ignoring their arrival.

Mack’s gaze narrowed. That was General Hale, all right. But this was too easy...

A gun cocked by his ear, and they stiffened.

"Ah...” said Hale, not turning around. “I wondered how that cloaking device we took from Johnson would work.”

A shimmer, and a blank Pepper Potts materialized, pistol in hand, pointing at Mack.

"Ms. Potts, bring our guests this way? Oh, and I assure you, Agent Mackenzie, unlike last time? This gun has real bullets.”

As the team moved towards her, Hale’s expression turned stony.
"Agents Hunter, Morse. My sources had you in DC this morning. I am most displeased. You..." she continued, addressing Crystal, "You’re new. Was this your doing?"

"No," Crystal replied calmly. "But this is."

Crystal grabbed the neck of Pepper’s gun and concentrated. Immediately, the gunstock froze solid, and Pepper gasped. Crystal whirled, and punched Pepper in the face, knocking her out.

Turning back to Hale, they found her calmly raising an eyebrow.

"You’re too late," she nodded as the hangar door retracted. "I believe the StarkJet is armed?"

The Starkjet landed, but remained powered up. The door opened.

"Hostages work both ways, Agent Mackenzie. I’m sure the Confederacy wouldn’t begrudge us one minor casualty."

Hale raised her voice.

"Bring Elena out, Ruby. I’m sure Agent Mackenzie would like a chance to say goodbye. Unless..." She cocked an eyebrow at the team.

"Surrender."

“Oh, you wish to surrender to us?” came a familiar voice from the jet.

Daisy climbed out of the ladder, her arm outstretched and focused, her power straining to be set free.

"We accept."

Daisy finished strapping a restrained General Hale beside her unconscious daughter in the StarkJet.

"I just got off the phone with Vijay at the hospital. Elena’s still in surgery. She lost a lot of blood."

His gaze hardened as he looked at the Hales.

"I assure you, Agent Mackenzie, that was not my intent." General Hale responded. "In fact, she was ordered not to harm any of them in any way. The Confederacy wanted them alive and unharmed..."

Neither of them responded as they exited the jet.

"Ok," Daisy started, "So, Mack is going by dog to the hospital to switch off with Vijay, who's coming back here to deal with this mess."

Lockjaw appeared by Daisy’s side. Mack and Hunter flinched.

Lockjaw panted, leaning into the head scratch from Daisy.

"He likes a good tummy rub." noted Crystal amusedly.

Lockjaw looked up at Daisy hopefully.

"Not enough time, I’m afraid." Daisy responded. "Bobbi said Jemma told her that Rogers, Vision and the rest were off to Wakanda."
"As soon as Bruce and Rhodes get there."

"Ok, then we need to get to Wakanda as fast as we can. There may not be much time left."

"I will wait here for Mr. Nadeer," said Crystal. "I can make sure that...HYDRA...remain unthreatening until all the collars have been removed. And I think we need to...talk."

She turned to Mack.

"We...the Inhumans..owe you, Alphonso Mackenzie, for the care you showed for our children here, and for, perhaps, proving that humans have something more to offer us."

She removed a ring and held it out to him.

"If you need either myself or Lockjaw, just call. We will hear you."

Mack smiled.

"With all respect, Lady Crystal, no thanks are necessary. But could you give the ring to Agent Johnson? I think she may have more need of you than I will."

Daisy took the ring, and Crystal looked at her measuringly.

"I think, once this is all over, we will also need to talk, Daisy Johnson, Inhuman of SHIELD."

"Probably. But let’s save the universe first."

Daisy lifted Pepper Potts into her arms and boarded the plane, Hunter and Bobbi on her heels.

Daisy watched through the window as the school disappeared from sight. She looked up to find General Hale staring at her across the way.

"What?" she snapped.

"Agent Johnson...I know you have no reason to trust me. But...the Confederacy was quite clear. No human or Inhuman has the ability to stop Thanos. Please...if not Ruby...you need to use the chamber."

Daisy laughed and stood up.

"General Hale, let me be clear. You would have to be insane to be infused with Gravitonium. I’d sooner be dead than step in there."

"It may come down to that, Agent. Please..."

Daisy shook her head and made her way to the cockpit.

"Have you been able to reach the mansion?"

Bobbi shook her head.

"Nobody’s...wait. Clint? Yeah, we’re safe. We have Daisy and her team..."

Bobbi looked up.

"Here, he wants to talk to you."
Daisy took the com.

"Barton?"

"Thank God, Daisy, you're safe. May will be relieved."

"She and AC are back, then? Did they get the stone?"

A pause.

"May brought back the stone...but..."

Daisy’s heart plummeted.

"No..." she whispered.

"We don’t have all the story yet...Phil didn’t make it back."

Tears sprang to Daisy’s eyes, and she fought them down.

The com crackled in her ear.

"Wait, another portal? Oh...my...Go..."

The line went dead.

"Clint? CLINT??"

Daisy looked at Bobbi.

"It cut out. I think...something followed May home."

Bobbi was silent.

"Which way do we go, Quake? Clint and May....or Wakanda?"

---

**CODA**

**Lakeside, New York State**

“You know, you Inhumans aren’t so scary after all.” mocked the HYDRA soldier, tying up the last terrified child.

He turned to General Hale’s aide, Ms. Lee. Now that was a scary lady.

"That’s all of them, ma’am.” he confirmed, saluting her.

“Good. Pack them, let’s get back to the house. They’re waiting for us.”

"I’m sure that they are.” came a metallic voice from the forest. “Children, close your eyes.”

"Who?” Candice Lee had time to ask before the first laser point bloomed, followed by a shot.

Within minutes her troop had fallen at her feet, exit wounds sizzling.

"No, please...” she begged, as the red dot found her chest.
"Shall I show you the same mercy you and yours have shown these little ones?" the voice asked.

A final retort echoed over the lake.

The sound of footsteps, and a hand reached down and gently touched a young child’s shoulder.

She looked up into his face, and screamed.

"Shhh...it’s OK. I’m a friend. I might look scary in the outside, but I’m here to help all of you.”

The hand wiped away her tears, as he set to work untangling her.

"You know, I have a son your age. His name is Ace.”

Mike “Deathlok” Peterson moved onto the next child.

It was time to get them all home.

Chapter End Notes

All right, so the Hales have been defeated...for now. As much as HYDRA is ever defeated. But there’s a bigger threat on the horizon as the final battles draw closer.

My apologies to Yo-Yo fans out there...yes, for you non-AOS people out there, Yo-Yo did have her arms cut off by Ruby, quite graphically, actually, gaining metallic arms for the last part of the season. It’s canon in the comics as well.

And hello, if briefly, to Crystal from The Inhumans. Hmm..I wonder just why Lockjaw hung out with Kamala? That might be another story for another work.

Some references to the Tie That Binds, here. Yes, the army stuck the chamber in the same place Natasha sprung LOLA from. Man, I’d hate to be the one on the receiving side of that security audit. And Bobbi and Hunter have been to Vijay’s mansion before...playing bodyguards to him and (the late) Cassie Clements. And remember that Deathlok was cleaning up the Watchdogs? Guess a few Squids crossed his path too...

Next up, this IS an Infinity War story, after all. It’s time for the most epic dance off in the galaxy!

(Or maybe we just take butt, kick names...)
With Apologies to the Russos...

Chapter Summary

In the over 14,000,605 alternate universes existing in the Marvel Universe, some things just don’t change.

Err...more or less.... ;)

And Tony Stark gets a new...appreciation...for Nick Fury and Phil Coulson.

Chapter Notes

I need to make this clear. The majority of this chapter is taken _directly_ from Avengers 3: Infinity War, and is not mine (I've written around it. The internal commentary - thoughts/feelings is from me). No ownership is claimed or implied. As always, all credit to the writers, cast and crew of the original movie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ebony Maw’s Spaceship

There were just some people that you never could get along with, Tony Stark mused.

Too bad he had to save the universe with one of them.

"I think we’re here!” he called out, as an alien planet’s surface became alarmingly closer.

Dr. Stephen Strange and Peter Parker peered over his shoulder.

"I don’t think this rig has a self-park function.” Strange noted dryly.

Peter just gulped as the ground came rushing towards them.

Tony reached out, grabbed Strange by the necklace and jerked him towards the steering mechanism.

"Get your hand inside the steering gimbal. Close those around it.” he ordered.

Strange quickly did as instructed, then lifted an eyebrow.

"Yep, got it.”

Tony let out a breath. They really only had one shot at this.

"This was meant for one big guy, so we gotta move at the same time.”

He braced himself, and, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Strange mirroring his pose.

"Okay, okay. Ready.” he breathed out.
"We might want wanna turn..." observed Peter as a mountain range appeared in the ship’s viewfinder, closer than expected.

Strange swore under his breath, and Tony closed his eyes.

“Turn! Turn! Turn!” he yelled, turning the gimbal with all of his might.

The spaceship nicked the corner of the range, and spun dizzyingly towards the surface. Working together, Strange and Tony barely pulled it level, as it slowed and rolled to a halt, leaning on a hillside beside the long abandoned ruins of a house.

The impact of landing still was enough to send the three of them flying across the room, crashing into walls, and stunning them for an instant.

Strange shook himself off, and ran his hands down his cloak, which gave him a reassuring squeeze. As Peter got up and stumbled towards the hole he had made in the ship, Strange leaned down and offered Tony a hand.

“You all right?” he asked, helping the other man to his feet.

Tony nodded.

"That was close."

Strange swallowed heavily, as they followed Peter out of the ship.

"I owe you one."

Tony figured that was as much of a thank you he was going to get for saving his life...twice now. He decided to let it pass, he'd collect when they got back to Earth.

If they got back to Earth.

The three humans peered across a desolate landscape. Tony could imagine it being beautiful once, terraced and green. Now, it was nothing but rocks, some hardy remainder of plant life poking out of crumbling foundations, the air as dry as in the Arizona desert.

As the three of them poked around, Peter came to a sudden halt, every hair on his arms standing straight up, the back of his neck tingling painfully.

"Let me just say," he choked out, "if aliens wind up implanting eggs in my chest or something...and I eat one of you, I'm sorry."

Tony groaned.

"I do not want another single pop culture reference out of you for the rest of the trip. You understand?"

Peter shook his head, moving bravely closer to the ruins.

"I'm trying to say that something is coming." he started, then yelped and fell over backwards as an insect like female materialized in front of him.

As Peter scuttled backwards, two other figures flanked her, a masked male, and a smaller Hulk. With red veins running through his torso.
“Thanos!” the masked man bellowed, as Tony and Strange hurried to rescue Peter.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Please don't put your eggs in me!” begged Peter, as Strange’s cloak wrapped itself around the green man, yanking him off his feet.

“Stay down, clown.” ordered the masked man, yanking the insect lady behind him.

“Die, blanket of death!” growled the green man, wrestling with it. A blast from Strange knocked him off his feet, and the cloak retreated back onto his shoulders.

Tony powered up his repulsors. In return, the masked man paused, then pulled Peter up, jamming a gun into his side and using him as a shield.

Tony fought down his rage and fear, as he aimed at the green man.

"Everybody stay where you are. Chill the eff out.” he ordered.

“I'm gonna ask you this one time.” snarled their leader. “Where is Gamora?”

"Yeah. I'll do you one better.” Tony snapped back. “Who's Gamora?”

"I'll do you one better.” snarled the green man. “Why is Gamora?”

"Not helping, Drax.”

Tony and Strange looked at each other. Strange shrugged.

"Tell me where the girl is or I swear to you I'm gonna French fry this little freak.”

The masked man jerked Peter tighter. Peter (sensibly, for once) held very still.

“Let's do it. You shoot my guy and I'll blast him.” Tony nodded at Drax. “Let's go!”

Drax steadied himself.

"Do it, Quill! I can take it.”

"No, he can't take it!” wailed the insect lady.

"She's right. You can't.” agreed Strange.

"Oh, yeah?” Quill snapped. “You don't wanna tell me where she is? That's fine. I'll kill all three of you and I'll beat it out of Thanos myself.”

He leaned closer to Peter.

"Starting with you.”

Tony lowered his weapons.

"Wait, what, Thanos?” he asked.

Strange sighed and lowered his hands.

"All right, let me ask you this one time. What master do you serve?”

Quill didn’t waver.
"What master do I serve? What am I supposed to say, 'Jesus'?'"

Tony’s mouth dropped open.

"You're from Earth."

Quill lifted a hand and touched a button. The mask retracted. A human face, mid-30’s appeared.

"I'm not from Earth, I'm from Missouri."

"Yeah, that's on Earth, dipshit." replied Tony. “What are you hassling us for?”

Quill lowered his gun slightly.

"So you're not with Thanos?” asked Strange.

"With Thanos?” huffed Quill. “No, I'm here to kill Thanos. He took my girl.”

Some things were universal, thought Tony, as Quill let Peter go.

"Wait, who are you?” Quill asked.

"We're the Avengers, man.” Peter responded as Strange sighed.

“Oh.” The insect lady chirped. “You're the ones Thor told us about.”

"You know Thor?” Tony asked, eyebrows raising.

"Yeah.” Quill confirmed, waving his hand dismissively. “Tall guy, not that good-looking, needed saving.”

Tony and Strange exchanged a glance. Were these the...Guardians...that had rescued Coulson and Thor?

"Where is he now?” asked Tony.

---

Titan

After introductions had been completed, and they had updated the Guardians of the Galaxy on Coulson’s status (Tony gave up, and concluded that Phil really did know everyone in the universe), the planning session was ready to start.

Sort of.

"Yeah, we got one advantage.” Tony mused. “He's coming to us. We'll use it.”

He thought for a moment, and then snapped his fingers.

"All right, I have a plan. Or at least the beginnings of one. It's pretty simple. We draw him in, pin him down, get what we need.”

Tony began to pace, Peter watching him intently.

"Definitely don't wanna dance with this guy. We just want the gauntlet....”

Suddenly he stopped, whirled and pointed at Drax.
"Are you yawning? In the middle of this, while I'm breaking it down? Huh?"

Drax merely blinked at him. Mantis studied them, her pleasant face blank, showing no overt comprehension.

Tony sighed.

"Did you hear what I said?"

Drax cleaned out his ear.

"I stopped listening after you said, "We need a plan."" he offered, gazing out into the distance.

Tony rubbed the bridge of his nose. Suddenly, he had a lot more sympathy for Coulson and Fury. Steve, well, that was still another story.

"Okay, Mr. Clean is on his own page."

Drax beamed. Mantis raised her hand tentatively.

"See, "not winging it" isn't really what they do." she said.

"Uh, what exactly is it that they do?" asked Peter.

She drew herself up beside Drax, and put on her most intense face.

"Kick names, take ass." she snarled. Cuteness.

She reminded Tony of the high school cheerleaders he used to...date.

"Yeah, that's right." agreed Drax.

And did he ever fit the definition of the dumb jock....

Tony did a mental face palm.

"All right, just get over here, please." he sighed. "Mr. Lord, can you get your folks to circle up?"

"'Mr. Lord.'" Quill scoffed. "Star-Lord is fine."

But he got up and joined the conversation, waving his team to come join them.

"We gotta coalesce. 'Cause if all we come at him with is a plucky attitude..."

Quill scowled.

"Dude, don't call us plucky. We don't know what it means."

Tony could feel the headache forming as Quill took over the plan thread.

"All right, we're optimistic, yes. I like your plan. Except it sucks..."

Tony mentally groaned.

"...so let me do the plan," Quill continued, "and that way it might be really good."

Drax nudged him.
“Tell him about the dance-off to save the universe.”

Peter perked up, as Tony closed his eyes, wincing.

"What dance-off?” the teen asked.

Quill grinned modestly.

"It's nothing."

"Like in Footloose, the movie?” Peter asked, and Tony knew he had lost control of the meeting.

This never happened to him, he thought. He was always in control, he...

"Exactly like Footloose.” Quill confirmed, cocking his head. “Is it still the greatest movie in history?”

Peter wrinkled his nose.

"It never was."

Quill opened his mouth in indignation, and Tony quickly held up his hands.

"Don't encourage this, all right?” he snapped at Peter.

"Okay.” Peter sullenly replied.

"We're getting no help from Flash Gordon here.” Tony continued.

Peter frowned in confusion.

"Flash Gordon?"

Tony turned to Quill, who was still ready to continue arguing.

"By the way, that's a compliment.” Tony told him.

Quill laughed derogatorily.

"Don't forget, I'm half human. So that 50% of me that's stupid... that's 100% you.”

Tony stared at him.

“Your math is blowing my mind.” he said turning away from them.

Mantis looked behind them in curiosity.

"Excuse me.” she asked Tony. “But does your friend often do that?”

What now...Tony thought as he followed Mantis' gaze.

Strange sat two feet off the ground, his eyes flickering open and shut faster than Tony could follow. The arms jerked up and down as if they were held by invisible strings. A green aura shone around him.

This...was not science anymore. This was so far out of Tony's ballpark, he might as well have been playing another game altogether.
Finally, Tony could believe Dr. Stephen Strange was the Sorcerer Supreme.

Maybe he should invite him to the wedding?

The green glow faded, and Strange slowly lowered himself to the ground. Sitting on a rock, he blinked several times, his gaze unseeing, tracks of long dried tears over his face,

Tony walked over to him and knelt by his side.

"Strange, we all right?"

Strange turned his face to Tony, blinking sharply, his eyes trying to focus. His breath came in short spurts, and Tony could tell his was trying to regain his equilibrium.

Shielding him from the others, Tony reassured him quietly, “You're back. You're all right.”

Finally Strange seemed to snap himself back into place, his gaze sharpening, intently focusing on Tony. He took a deep breath.

"Hi."

Tony nodded, pretending he didn’t see one of the most powerful men in the world become undone.

"Hey," he replied nonchalantly, “What was that?"

Strange swallowed hard.

"I went forward in time to view alternate futures. To see all the possible outcomes of the coming conflict."

Tony gulped.

"How many did you see?"

“14,000,605.”

Tony closed his eyes. Then asked the most important question of all.

"How many did we win?"

Strange did not meet Tony’s eyes.

“One.”

Chapter End Notes

So we’re back in Infinity War, with Team Stark and the Guardians finally meeting up. I thought that these scenes were key going forward in any IW story, with the interesting relationships between Tony & the Guardians. I'll go back to my take on the whole thing next chapter.

Tony, often described in fan fic as one of the less mature Avengers, winds up being one of the most mature on Titan. Seeing him deal with what he put Fury & Coulson through
in the Iron Man movies gave me a bit of a chuckle. I bet he was wishing for Coulson’s tazer...

And some things are universal...saving one’s True Love, for example. Maybe Quill and Tony can bond over that. If they have time, that is.

Next up, there seems to be a...misunderstanding about who owns the Soul Stone.

It gets cleared up in the next chapter.
Chapter Summary

The arrival of Melinda May on Earth with the Soul Stone has everyone at New Avengers Mansion occupied with one question.

What are they going to do with it?

5 people, 6 answers.

Wait...six?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New Avengers Mansion

Agent Melinda May sat on the bench outside the mansion, her fingers running over the Soul Stone. Had it really been only a day since the Guardians had returned Phil Coulson to Earth...to her? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

She gazed into the crystalline facets, trying to see whatever...wisdom...the Red Skull had claimed back on Vormir. But the stone stubbornly held onto whatever secrets it possessed.

Just like Phil, she supposed.

Valkyrie frowned at the Agent. May paid her no mind. The Asgardian would come out with it when it was time.

"Agent May..." she started, then stopped.

Elliot Randolph sighed. Robbie Reyes had opened a portal and hauled him from Wong's sanctuary, shortly after Valkyrie emerged from the communication centre, unable to contact Thor or the Guardians. Although Randolph would never admit it openly, he had been fond of the troublesome Midgarian Coulson, and his loss had shaken him. He blamed himself for not realizing the danger in time, and had been racking his brains for some way to help.

"Will you spit it out, Brunnhilde?" he snapped.

The woman glared at him, and then sat down beside May.

"I would know, May, how it is that you can handle an Infinity Stone?" she asked.

May grew still, her hold on the stone tightening.

"No ordinary being can stand the direct touch of the stone." Valkyrie persisted. "Are you truly human...or is there part Celestial in you?"
May looked at the Asgardians, confused.

Randolph shook his head.

"No, May is fully human," he commented. "I would have sensed a Celestial presence the first time we met."

"And you would have fled..." noted Robbie Reyes drily, joining the group, Clint Barton trailing him warily.

Randolph shrugged.

"It would have been prudent. A Celestial would have blown the cover I had been perfecting for centuries. Unfortunately, Coulson did that quite nicely on his own when he sprung me from that jail cell in Norway."

May huffed a small chuckle.

"No, my dear Valkyrie, it's something different." he continued. "Something you of all people should recognize."

Valkyrie glared at her fellow Asgardian.

"Would you care to share with the rest of us?"

"When Phil...died...to obtain the stone, it was not just a sacrifice. It was a sacrifice of the self. A very powerful death, giving up everything that you have...your very existence. And, given that Agent May was the only other person who could have made that choice, in a very real sense, Phil died for her."

May bowed her head, as Randolph swallowed.

"The stone would never harm Melinda May, Brunnhilde. Phil Coulson would never allow it to."

Everyone was silent for a moment, the only sound was that of the breeze, some chirping of a songbird in the distance.

"What do we do now?" asked Clint quietly. "There are three stones out there, and from all accounts, this Thanos becomes more powerful with each stone he gets his hands on."

Robbie gritted his teeth. This is, after all, what he had come to do in the first place. The Rider remained silent, observing in the back of his mind.

"Then we destroy it." he ground out, marching over to May.

May jumped up, taking a defensive posture.

"Over my dead body!" she snapped. "This is our only link to Phil..."

"Who is dead." said Valkyrie, rising to her feet, supporting Robbie. "Do not let his death be in vain, Melinda May."
"Oh, hell, no!" replied Clint, taking sides, shoving his way closer to May. "Even if there is a shot at bringing him back again...."

"We can't risk it." decided Robbie. "Give it to me, May. The Rider can do the rest."

"Never!"

Robbie internally sighed. He hated to do this, with every part of his being, but...

He lowered his head, focusing. When he looked back at May, his head was lit, and a demonic fire glowed in his eyes.

As Clint lunged for the Rider, Valkryie intercepted him.

"It is the only way, Barton..."

"Absolutely not..." he spit out, twisting away from her.

Faster than any human could react, the Rider's hand reached out, and yanked the Stone out of May's hands.

He held it for a microsecond, then let out a horrendous wail, dropping it to the ground, falling to his knees.

As May scooped the stone back up, and pulled her Glock, the Rider morphed back into Robbie Reyes, cradling his hand.

"What the fuck..." he yelped.

Indeed...

"Serves him right..." muttered Clint, yanking out his bow and covering the group.

"Everyone, calm down..." ordered Randolph, holding out his hands, trying to defuse the situation.

"What the hell was that, May?" Robbie yelled, getting back to his feet.

"Stay away, Reyes!" Melinda ordered, keeping the gun trained on him.

Finally, Randolph lost his temper.

"Will all of you shut up and listen to me?" he roared.

The ground shook just a little. Valkryie raised a eyebrow.

"Impressive. How many centuries has it been?"

"Not nearly long enough." Randolph snarked back.

He pushed his way past Robbie, and stood in front of May.
"No one is going to take the stone from you, Agent May. No one can."

"Damn right..." she snarled.

Randolph turned and looked at the rest of the group.

"Weren't any of you paying attention? Especially you, Mr. Reyes. I swear, you're all like my first year students back in '65..." He paused. "Was it 1965 or 18..."

**What happened, Asgardian?**

Randolph narrowed his eyes.

"I am not impressed, demon...so knock it off."

He sighed.

"Phil Coulson died for Melinda May. It won't allow anyone to hurt her...but it also won't allow itself to be parted from her."

He looked over his shoulder.

"From what I understand, not much different than in real life."

May's lips upturned a little, and Randolph refocused on the rest of the group.

"In these types of situations, the stone must be given up of the possessor's own free will." He looked pointedly at Robbie. "I would say that this seems to fit."

Robbie glared at Randolph.

"Agent May," he started.

"No," she said simply, re-sheathing her gun. "He stays with me."

As Robbie and Valkyrie looked at each other with exasperation, Clint pulled a phone out of his pocket. He raised his eyebrows at the name on the screen.

"Sorry, I need to take this."

He moved away from the rest of the group.

"Barton...Bobbi? How are you..."

May turned her attention to Randolph.

"Is there any way of getting Phil back?" she asked.

Randolph shrugged.

"Probably, but any reset would probably put us back where we started, with the Soul Stone available to anyone who would pay the price."
"You got Daisy?" Clint asked the phone. "I need to talk to her...."

"Are you willing to risk half the universe on this?" Valkyrie asked quietly.

"I know what is at stake," growled May. "I promised Phil I would move the universe to get him back. Once we defeat Thanos, I intend to keep that promise."

"I hope you're right." said Robbie. "Because I expect we'll have company very soon."

"What does THAT mean?" snapped Randolph.

Robbie nodded at Valkyrie.

"There's a debt to be paid. My type of debt. To all of those who died today. And you, Agent May," he said, pointing at the stone, "have the one thing he wants."

"This was a trap?" exclaimed May, pulling her Glock back out.

"Of a sort...but not for you. If you won't let me destroy the stone, then I'm going to have to go straight to the source."

Robbie jerked his head at the clearing. A black hole was forming, quickly growing larger and larger, much bigger than any human.

Get behind us, Agent May.

The Rider's gaze narrowed at the portal.

This is no longer your fight.

"May, get out of here, you must protect the stone!" yelled Randolph, shoving her towards the house.

Clint looked up from his phone.

"Wait, another portal?" he groaned, then stopped, staring at the being who pushed his way through. "Oh...my..Go..."

He let the phone slip through his fingers, nocking an arrow to his bow. Valkyrie let out a snarl of rage. Robbie moved to stand in front of May and Randolph.

Thanos looked around, the sunlight glinting off his purple skull.

"Hello," he rumbled, "I believe you have something of mine."

His gaze swung to fix on Melinda May, and he smiled.

"Good-bye, May!" called Clint, letting his explosive arrows fly.

Thanos lifted his gauntlet, and Clint's arrows disintegrated into their components, littering the forest floor. With a twist of Thanos' hand, the tree Clint had been standing under engulfed him, leaving
only his head showing.

With a scream of rage, Valkyrie charged at Thanos, who turned to meet her. Smiling slightly, he allowed her to charge through the clearing towards him. Lifting his palm, a bright blue beam struck her, tossing her back the way she came. She crumpled to the floor, motionless.

"He's toying with us, Melinda...RUN!" yelled Randolph, heading over to the other Asgardian's side.

Thanos chuckled as his gaze fell on the Rider. He lifted his eyebrows.

"Well, you could be a challenge." the titan observed.

The Rider growled, as he swung his chain around Thanos, and lit up the fire.

"Is that it, demon of Vengeance?" Thanos mocked, grabbing the chain and yanking the Rider over to him.

**Not at all. I just needed to get close enough for this.**

The Rider caught Thanos's eyes and stared, willing the being's dark deeds and murders to overcome his soul.

Thanos paused, wavering. Then he smiled, and it chilled even the Rider.

"I have done nothing I regret, demon. These deaths you call me to task for, they were necessary to restore order in the Universe. Even yours."

Thanos snapped the chain, and tossed the Rider, like a rag doll, into the trees. He lay still.

Thanos made a slight gesture, and the ground surged over May's feet, trapping her in place.

"Melinda May, I presume? I'm told you have a fearsome reputation here on Terra. Of course, I've never heard of you. Until today."

"I'd say that makes us even." she responded.

Thanos's lips quirked up. Then he sighed.

"Oh please, Asgardian. Don't embarrass yourself."

Randolph let out a yelp as Valkyrie's sword extended and wrapped around him.

"Where were we?" Thanos asked, returning his gaze to May.

"You were about to ask for the stone...and I was about to tell you to go to hell." May growled.

"I can accept that," said Thanos. "Melinda May, no matter what these beings may have told you, I am not a wanton murderer. I only seek to restore a balance to the universe. I don't want to kill you. I just want the stone."

May didn't respond, glaring at him.
Thanos's gaze...softened?

"We have both lost so much today. We have both had to make sacrifices for the Stone. Your Phil. My...daughter. Both lie dead at the foot of the mountain at Vorimir. We have both done what has been asked of us, what has been required of us. Now it is time to fulfill your destiny. Give me the stone."

"My answer hasn't changed, you son of a bitch. Go to hell."

Thanos paused, considering her.

"I know the stone only answers to you, Melinda May. I'm not sure that it wouldn't do so after your death. But..."

Thanos lifted up his gauntlet and concentrated. There was suddenly a shimmer, and three red balls hung suspended over the clearing.

Holding three terrified Barton children.

"NO!" screamed Clint, struggling to break free.

"You bastard..." breathed May.

"I would trade you, Melinda May. 3 lives, just barely beginning, for one that was supposed to be over long ago."

Thanos chuckled.

"I would even say you got the better part of the deal."

May stood aghast. She had been forced to make a deal like this before, years ago, in Bahrain.

The lives of the universe? Or the lives of the Barton children?

The red ball pulsed, and the children cried out in pain.

"I will ask you one more time, Melinda May. Give. Me. The. STONE."

Melinda drew the Soul Stone out of her pocket. She turned it over. What would Phil do?

She was kidding herself. She knew, down deep in her soul, what Phil would have done.

She closed her eyes and made her choice.

The Soul Stone thumped to the floor at Thanos's feet.

"Ahhh..." he purred, as the red bubbles floated to the ground and popped open.

Thanos gently lifted the Soul Stone to the Gauntlet, and dropped it into the device. It glowed for a moment, then went dark.

Thanos crossed the clearing and considered the figure of Robbie Reyes.
"I will give you one last boon, for your cooperation."

He held his hands over Robbie's body. He shuddered for a moment, then his eyes opened, unfocused.

Turning, Thanos smiled.

"Thank you."

He stepped through the portal, and disappeared.

Melinda yanked her feet through the ground and ran to the Barton children.

"Are you all right?" she asked. They nodded, numbly, back.

"Daddy..." one wailed.

"Go back inside the house with Mr. Randolph. Find your mom."

May regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth. If that was what Thanos did to the kids, what might he have done to Laura?

"Cooper, Nate, Lila!!" came a scream from the door.

Laura Barton stumbled out as her children rushed to meet her.

May turned away from the reunion, and headed towards the forest.

"Watch it, Randolph!"

"One more word out of you, Barton, and I'll leave you in the tree!"

Randolph pried at the bark, working frantically to free Clint.

May left them to it, hurrying over to Robbie's side.

The slight man groaned and sat up slowly. He slowly focused, and his face turned pale.

"I'm alive..."

"Yeah, I was worried when Thanos threw the Rider, and he didn't get up..." started May.

Robbie held up his hand.

"No, you don't understand. I'M alive. The Rider is...gone..."

They looked at each other.

"Oh, God..."
CODA
*Heathrow Airport, England*
(Slightly before the above)

The Starkjet landed discreetly off to the side of the runway. As it pulled to a stop, another shimmer, and the Wakandan jet appeared on the tarmac.

"Nice," commented James Rhodes. "I know Tony would have loved to get his hands on this."

"Yeah, well, let's hope we can show it around as a 'welcome home' present." commented Bruce Banner, hot on Rhodey's heels.

The gangplank of the airplane opened, and the two men strode up into the plane.

"Bruce, Rhodey...thanks for coming," said Steve Rogers. "We're going to need all the help we can get."

He glanced at Rhodes.

"You might want to get out of that," he said, giving the War Machine armor a dubious look. "It's a long way to Wakanda."

"It was a long way from New York." Rhodes tossed back. "Someday, Tony will give me the suitcase treatment. I hope."

As the doors slid shut, Bruce turned around, blinking in the light.

The atmosphere was more subdued than he would have thought. The two younger UK SHIELD Agents were sitting off in the corner. Tears were streaming down the woman's face as her partner held her, his anguished gaze off in the distance.

"What did we miss?" asked Rhodey, surveying the plane.

"Don't know..." responded Bruce.

He continued up to the cockpit. He'd find some answers there.

Natasha Romanoff sat in the pilots seat, running through the final checks. Her face showed nothing, but her body was tense.

"Nat."

"Bruce." She gave him a wan smile. "Welcome aboard."

He took the co-pilot's seat.

"What's wrong?"

Natasha stilled, a slight swallow her only indication that there was something wrong.

"Clint called in. May returned with the Soul Stone."
Bruce immediately made the connection.

"But not Coulson."

"No...something about a sacrifice."

"I'm so sorry, Nat."

She nodded, her green eyes misting for a moment. Bruce leaned over, put his hand on hers.

"We'll avenge him, Natasha. That's what we do..."

Steve came up behind them.

"Yeah, that is what we do." he agreed. "We ready, Widow?"

"Ready, Cap."

"Then let's go get ready to save the universe..."

"Three stones to rule them all, Cap?" Bruce quipped.

"Uhh..."

Bruce and Nat gave each other a look.

"We are so adding that to your list..."

The Wakandan jet shimmered in the English sky, and then disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

Well..actually now 2 stones, Bruce, but we'll let you find that out later.

Poor Melinda May. She's having a pretty rough day. Remember, everyone, events in Infinity War took place over a span of 1-2 days...so yes, we are coming pretty close to finishing up Day 1.

And wasn't it NICE of Thanos to restore Robbie? Oh boy...that does leave a good chunk of our heroes reliant on planes in North America. And points to you if you know why the Penance Stare didn't work on Thanos. ;)

Finally, Lord of the Rings was published in 1954, so, no, Steve wouldn't have gotten that last reference. Maybe the in-flight movies to Wakanda?

Next up: Time is running out for (half of) the universe, but an unintended action could change everything. But only one person can help put our heroes (err..singular, actually) on that path.

Let him just go grab his cardigan... ;)
Chapter Summary

The multi-universe meets and flows through at various places. Sometimes through doors. And sometimes through monoliths.

And sometimes through Stones.

And there's only one man who's ever been able to tell them apart. And when half the universe is on the line, it's time for him to have another talk to a dead man.

You know, he hasn't changed much since that train in Italy... ;)

Chapter Notes

Sped up the posting time in honor of Agents of SHIELD's 5th Anniversary today!
Happy 5th Bday to my favorite group of spies and superheros in the MCU :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He drifted through thought and memory, nothing staying with him very long, and nothing seeming to touch him at all.

There was a multitude of endings that he passed through, a passive observer to millions of little scenes playing around him.

The sight of a woman, her black hair dotted by snow, blowing madly around her, fading into the distance.

A black patch scarring his chest, taking over his body on a sunlit beach.

A Quinjet, returning to a lighthouse, a serum safely where it needed to be.

Closing his eyes for the last time on the helicarrier, never to reopen.

A red and black masked man, ignoring his pleas, raising his gun.

Well now, that last one was just stupid.

He supposed that whatever small Catholic part left over from his childhood should be worried. This certainly wasn't the heaven they had been promised in Sunday School. But there was no pain, and it was peaceful. If it wasn't heaven, then it certainly wasn't hell either.

He could stay like this until someone figured out what to do with him. To him. For him?
Poke.

Ow.

Poke. Poke...Poke.

Go away. he thought. I've done my part. It's over.

Poke...Poke...POKE...

"Up and at 'em, kiddo."

The floating sensation stopped, and he groaned. Apparently this wasn't it, after all.

Phil Coulson opened his eyes.

The room he was in was bare. Orange light drifted through the opaque oval window creating a wall. A door, left ajar, gave no clue what lay beyond.

"Hurry up, kiddo, you don't have much time."

Phil got to his feet. He looked down. Still had both his arms, but was in his favourite suit and tie, his sunglasses carefully tucked in his breast pocket.

He passed his hand over his face. Clean shaven. Huh. It had been a while for that.

"Don't bother with the glasses, kiddo, I can read you just fine."

Will you quit it with the kiddo? Phil thought. It's getting annoying.

"Well, then get IN here, Agent."

Phil carefully stepped through the door. Anything to shut this guy up.

The room was circular. Only one door that he could see - his to be exact. But similar windows, high above his head. 2 shuttered, black. But one orange, one blue, one red, one purple. The light from each came in and danced throughout the room, mixing at times, layering on top, underneath.

"You took your ever-loving time, Phil."

Phil turned. A frail, older man stood in the center of the room. Grey, slicked back hair, cardigan, large glasses. He seemed..familiar...somehow.

"Don't think about it too hard." the old man advised with a twinkle in his eye.

Phil shrugged.

"Am I dead?" he asked.

The other man made a face.

"Well...yes. And no. It depends on what timeline you find yourself in. Those 'CoulsonLives' people
are pretty persistent."

"How about here. Right now?"

"OK. Good a place to start as any." The man sighed. "Do you remember dying?"

"Sort of."

"Now, do you remember why you died?"

Phil thought for a moment.

"I...no...we...needed to get a stone."

Everything started coming back to him.

"The Soul Stone."

The man looked at him piercingly and nodded.

"Good, we've got you realigned. You're a pretty popular fellow, Phil."

"I had to sacrifice myself so that we could get the Soul Stone before Thanos." Phil looked at the man. "Please tell me it worked."

"It did...for awhile." The man frowned. "Unfortunately, Thanos somehow got his hands on it, and added it to the Gauntlet."

Phil went pale.

"Melinda...please...is she all right?"

"I'm sorry, son, I don't know. I don't know much beyond these walls."

"Who are you?"

"I'm...a guardian...of sorts. There are powers in the universe that were never meant to come back together. The Infinity Stones are high up on that list."

He scratched his head.

"I was supposed to keep them apart. But I got distracted, and they slowly drifted back together into clumps. And then Thanos, with his cockamamie scheme to restore balance to the Force..."

The man shook his head.

"Sorry, wrong universe."

Phil's lips twitched.

"Anyways, Thanos. He finally got momentum. By the time he picked up the third one, there wasn't anything I could do. And then you."
"The Soul Stone."

The man looked shrewdly at Phil.

"The sacrifice is a test, Phil Coulson. To really understand the sacrifice of the stone, it has to be personal."

"I know, you have to sacrifice that which you love to use it."

The man shook his head.

"And therein lies the rub. If you truly, deeply loved somebody, the way in which the soul stone needs to see...would you really throw them off a cliff?"

"No."

"What it needs, Phil, is what you found your way into. If you truly needed the power of the soul stone, if it had to be something you truly loved, then the only sacrifice acceptable..."

"Is that of yourself."

"Got it." the older man beamed. "Now, yes, the person witnessing such an act would be, to the rest of the world, the keeper of the stone. But the true holder of the stone is the one making the sacrifice. Which is why you're here...rather than up on the next level."

Phil felt dizzy.

"That's impossible...there's no way that could ever happen..."

"Meh." The man polished his glasses. "There's very few things in the multiverse that could never happen."

"So...I...am the holder of the Soul Stone."

"Yep."

Phil thought for a moment.

"OK, I can handle that. So now what do I do?"

The man shrugged.

"Haven’t a clue."

Phil rubbed the bridge of his nose (habit, really. He still felt no pain.)

“You mean to tell me that I’m stuck in here, with this light show...and I’m supposed to save the universe...with just this?"

"Sounds about right."

"YOU’RE INSANE."
"No, making a deal with a demon is insanity. BASE jumping out through a portal leading to who knows where without a parachute is insanity. Going up against a god with a piddly assed gun is INSANITY. This? This is just another day at the office."

Phil sighed, accepting the truth of the statement.

"I thought you didn’t know much beyond these walls."

The man’s eyes twinkled again.

"Told you, I got distracted. American Netflix."

"Look, Phil," he continued "I’m not the mind stone. I can’t work this out for you. But if I were you...I’d pay very close attention when Thanos uses the Gauntlet next."

*Thanks for the tip,* Phil thought sourly.

"We’re running out of time, Phil. I know Nick Fury never meant it like this, but you may truly be the last line of defense for the Universe."

Phil nodded. Then his eyes narrowed, finally placing him.

"Sir...have you ever been to Italy?"

The man smirked as he faded out.

"That...would be telling...Agent."

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**CODA**

**New York City**

The bar didn’t look like much from the outside, but it was dimly lit, and the people inside were not inclined to ask questions.

It was also one that a younger Maria Hill had spent a lot of time in during her first years at SHIELD. Making friends...or at least allies. Strategizing together around to get around some of the older dinosaurs, hell-bent on keeping her in her ”place”. Mourning old friends, hazing the new ones.

Yes, this bar had a lot of memories for Maria. She only hoped her contact would feel the same way.

Looking around, she breathed a mental sigh of relief when she saw him at the bar. As she got closer, she realized he had seen her coming long before she saw him. The right hand chair was open.

She slid into the spot, ordered a beer.

"Wings still good?"

"Yep."

They drank in silence for awhile.

He was going to make her go first. Bastard.

"Need you in from the cold."
"The cold’s refreshing."

"They need you."

"No, they don’t. They chose their own paths with Sokavia. And Germany. And,” he gave her a sidelong glance, “One World. They don’t need me.”

“Is this what it’s about? Pissed that I didn’t read you in on Coulson?"

He took another pull.

"Coulson was a warm up, your ice breaker." Maria hissed. "You think they had questions for him? What sort of questions would they have wanted to ask you?"

His lips twitched.

She took a sip. And waited.

He sighed.

"Maybe I’m too tired for what it’ll mean if I do come back, Hill. You and Phil...you go keep up with the kids."

Enough was enough.

“I’m invoking Last Stand.”

That got his attention.

"Don’t screw with me on this,” he warned in a low voice.

Maria stood her ground.

"An event which will destroy half the known universe is confirmed to be inbound. Touching down on Earth within the next 48 hours. Tony Stark and Stephen Strange are off planet, the remainder of the Avengers are enroute to Wakanda to set up."

She leaned closer.

"Last Stand. All SHIELD personnel, no matter what their status...inactive, retired, hell...dead if necessary...are required to provide immediate assistance upon request. And I am so requesting."

He finished the beer.

"Besides,” Maria finished, “You’re the only one who knows where the damned pager is."

Nick Fury tossed some bills on the counter.

"Then come on, Agent Hill. Let’s go call an old friend."

Chapter End Notes

Just who was that cardiganed man? (Nah, you know who he is.) All real life cameos
meant with love and deep respect.

And hello to Nick Fury, not seen in A Tie That Binds. That is remedied here. I wonder where he left that pager...20 years is an awfully long time...

So while we leave Phil for a bit to figure out how to save the universe with a light show...we head back to Earth for one last pit stop before Wakanda. It's time for our North American Agents to saddle up and head towards the fighting.

Just how far is it to Wakanda?
Chapter Summary

Back at New Avengers Mansion, Team Daisy deals with the fallout from Thanos’ attack and capture of the Soul Stone. And time is running out for our North American heroes to reach Wakanda before the final battle.

(So pretty much what it says on the tin.)

Meanwhile, back on Titan, a madman meets the Supreme Sorcerer....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New Avengers Mansion

"We've got incoming!"

Robbie Reyes peered at the jet coming into their airspace. He shivered as the sun sank lower behind the hills surrounding the Avengers base. It had been a while since had to worry about climate and weather.

He wished to whatever God that was listening that he didn't have to now.

He clutched his gun, and faded back into the trees as the jet hung overhead for a moment, then sighed as the forested ground parted, allowing access to the underground parking for the various jets and Quinjets the Avengers stored here.

Friendlies, he thought, skirting his way along the trees. Or at least he hoped so. The way this day had gone, he wasn't sure that any of them could handle another traitor.

As the garage roof retracted over the Starkjet's head, shutting out the last vestiges of natural light, Daisy Johnson and Bobbi Morse shot each other worried looks. No responses had come from their repeated hails to the mansion. While they had flown as quickly as possible, it still had been a good hour from the Mace and Maddox School.

The fact that Ruby Hale had woken up halfway here wasn't helping matters either. Lance Hunter had to have been restrained several times from doing something drastic. Like pitching the woman who had casually severed his teammate's arms out the nearest door. At 30,000 feet. Truth be told, Daisy didn't really feel like stopping him, except they had webbed the Gravitonium the last Hydra members had planned to use to create the ultimate weapon right beside said door.

"Say...where is everyone?" Ruby cooed, in chains beside her mother. "You don't think Thanos could have gotten them?"

"Shut UP, Hale." growled Hunter, shrugging on his tac jacket, and checking his gun.
"Maybe if you let me..."

Hunter aimed the pistol at the blonde.

"The only reason you're still breathing is that Mack called in to say Yo-Yo made it through the surgery. Otherwise, I don't care how old you look, you'd be splattered across most of the mid-west."

Ruby smirked, and opened her mouth to answer him.

"Ruby, not another word." interrupted Katherine Hale. "That is an order."

Ruby shut it and pouted.

"I'm surprised, General." commented Daisy, putting on her gauntlets. "Thought you would have wanted us off our game."

"What I want, Agent Johnson, is the survival of the human race," replied the older woman. "HYDRA had the best chance for it. Now...I just want you to be ready for whatever comes in the 24 hours."

The General paused, and looked into Daisy's eyes.

"There is still time, Agent. We have the Gravitonium. We have the infusion chamber. You could save us all..."

Daisy scowled back.

"I'm not playing your little mind games. I told you before that I'd never help you, no matter what we were facing."

Bobbi opened the door, and activated the steps.

"Cover her, Hunter." Bobbi ordered. "I'll keep watch on these three."

Her partner nodded grimly, and took his position at Daisy's back.

Daisy cautiously exited the StarkJet, gauntled arms extended.

"Hello?" she called. "Anyone home?"

"Agent Johnson?" came a voice from above.

Daisy looked up.

"Mrs. Barton?" she asked in shock.

Laura Barton was perched on the railing, her rifle covering the StarkJet. She flipped the safety off, and Hunter's gun swung to follow the sound. Daisy held up her hands.

"Tell me, Agent, what is the one thing Agent May asks you to do when you practice Tai Chi together."

"Focus." Daisy replied.
It was the right thing to say, obviously, as Laura secured her weapon, and carefully climbed to the ground.

"I'm sorry, Daisy, but given everything else that happened today, we couldn't be too careful." she explained.

"What happened? Where is everyone?" asked Hunter, scanning the area.

Laura shook her head, and her next words chilled the two Agents.

"Thanos arrived."

"And he took the Stone." came a recognizable voice from the doorway.

Daisy's eyes narrowed at the newcomer.

"YOU!" she snapped, extending her arms to unleash her powers.

He came to a sudden halt, glancing around nervously.

"Can you hear me out before you kill me?" asked Robbie.

"From what we hear, you're already dead!" growled Hunter, stepping to the side and aiming.

"No, he's not."

Melinda May entered the room at a sprint.

"Stand down, Daisy." she ordered. "He's a friendly."

"He's going to kill..."

Daisy lowered her arms abruptly, as the realization hit her.

Melinda May moved in front of her, her gaze sweeping from Daisy's head to feet.

"Are you hurt?" May asked quietly.

Daisy shook her head absently.

"No...the blood's not mine." Daisy replied.

She gazed at her mentor....the mother of her heart.

"AC...Coulson's...really dead?" she asked, closing her eyes.

One more loss...but the one she might not be able to bear.

"Yes."

May pulled Daisy into a hug.

"But we're going to get him back. I swear it."

Hunter holstered his gun.

"Phil's dead...he's not..." he jerked his head at Robbie. "Doesn't anyone stay in their proper place
Things moved rapidly after that. Clint Barton switched places with Laura - he spoke very little as the team manhandled the Hales into the Mansion’s prison cells. Pepper Potts was more gently transported to her room.

"I'm worried she still hasn't woken up," admitted Daisy, stepping out of the room, locking it behind her.

"It's more like she hasn't been given permission to wake up." commented Bobbi, falling in beside her. "The Faustus method takes a lot out of its victims. She'll be OK."

"You three want to change?" asked Robbie, eyeing the battle-grimed trio.

"Maybe after we figure out what we're going to do." responded Daisy as they entered the meeting room.

"I'm sure you could take a moment..." sniffed Elliott Randolph, helping to arrange the food and water in the room.

"Or maybe not." observed the unknown lady in the room. "Time is running out for all of us, Randolph."

"Agents Johnson, Hunter, Morse, meet Valkyrie." May noted as an introduction. "Friend of Thor, arrived with Robbie here."

"I met your Agent Coulson in the Black Order prison ship." Valkyrie said quietly. "Thor said he was a valiant warrior. You have my condolences."

"Thanks, but May said we won't need them long."

Daisy looked at May quizzically.

"So Phil died...but not really?"

May shook her head.

"No...he died...I saw it...but we think the Soul Stone can bring him back."

Bobbi lifted an eyebrow.

"Sounds like we need sitreps all around."

May lifted hers in return taking a seat.

"You first, Morse."

After everyone had been filled in on the day's events, all sat back in thought.

"We need to decide quickly." noted Bobbi. "With Robbie now without the Rider, we can't portal into Wakanda. It's going to take at least 10 hours to fly there."

Daisy stood up.
"We need to try. With Vision's Mind Stone in Wakanda...Thanos will be headed there sooner or later. Cap and the others, they're going to need all the help they can get."

"But the Hales...Pepper. We can't just leave them here on their own." mused Hunter. "So some of us are going to have to stay here to keep watch."

They all eyed each other.

"I go to battle!" proclaimed Valkyrie.

Randolph rolled his eyes.

"That was a given." he noted. "I, on the other hand, won't be effective out in the field...I remained on Earth to avoid that sort of thing. I can stay here and keep watch, but I won't be of much use if our charming guests manage to break free."

The remaining humans looked at each other.

"I need to go." observed Daisy.

She looked at May.

"May, since the Stone is supposed to be yours..."

"Damn right I'm coming." snapped May, her eyes flashing. "I'm not leaving Phil in the hands of that madman..."

"Phil...You mean the Stone, right?" asked Hunter.

May glared at him.

"Not the time, Hunter..."

Daisy looked at Clint, who had yet to say a word.

"Clint, your family...do you..."

"Do NOT finish that sentence, Agent."

Clint's voice was low and dangerous, his eyes glittering.

"In the space of one day, Thanos killed one of my best friends, when I had just gotten him back, then he terrorized my family, and put my KIDS in harm’s way."

He stood up.

"If I don't put an arrow through Thanos's goddamned heart, I'll be there to see him fall."

The room was silent.

"So, Budapest?" asked May.
He glanced over at her.

"You have no idea."

"That's four." noted Randolph.

"I'm coming too." said Robbie suddenly.

"Now, wait just one moment..." objected Hunter.

"Robbie..." continued Bobbi, cutting off her partner. "It's appreciated, but...without the Rider..."

"We'll be going into a war, Robbie." interrupted Daisy. "You just got your life back. In Wakanda, you'll be..."

"Expendable." finished May flatly.

Robbie took a breath.

"I know that. And while I don't have the Rider, I still have the experience fighting against overwhelming odds of monsters and aliens."

He glanced at Daisy.

"Maybe even more than the rest of you."

Daisy's lips quirked.

"You took your oaths, Agents. I took mine. To the Rider. And while I appreciate my life...I'm needed as the Rider. And the only one that can bring us back together again....if that is possible...is in Wakanda."

Daisy folded her arms.

"And your deal? With Coulson? You become the Rider, he becomes toast."

"Literally." muttered Hunter.

Bobbie thwapped him across the back of his head.

Robbie shrugged miserably.

"I don't know what will happen, to be honest. Coulson died, I came back to life, maybe that cancels something out. But this is important. The Rider...he's key to a lot of things, Agent Johnson. There's a greater war out there, with stakes even higher than this one. The Rider and I, we fight in that war. If we can't get him back..."

Robbie trailed off, but his dark eyes met Daisy's. She gave a slight nod.

Elliot's gaze swung across the room.

"Then that leaves Agents Morse and Hunter."
"To be honest..." said Valkryie slowly, "You two may be best left behind to stand watch."

Bobbi's gaze became wrathful.

"Is it because Lance and I are ordinary humans?"

Clint chuckled.

"You've never been ordinary, Bobs." he noted.

"You're the ones connected with the government, Bobbi," noted May. "If this all goes south on us, you and Hunter might be best suited to keep SHIELD alive."

"Keep everything we've worked for over the past year alive." agreed Daisy. "The Inhumans know you...Vijay knows you. May's right, you two are best suited to carry on if we can't."

"Besides," Clint noted. "I give you full permission to beat the crap out of those two HYDRA goons should they try anything."

Hunter looked at Bobbi.

"There's that..." he noted. "And we'll need to get Pepper to Talbot before Tony gets here."

"I can talk her through the beginning, when she wakes up." Bobbi noted, sighing.

She looked at the others.

"Your family, Clint?"

"They'll be on their way when we leave, back to Laura's folks for a bit. She's getting the kids ready. They'll be safe enough there."

"Then it is decided?" asked Valkyrie.

"I guess so..." answered Daisy.

"I'll go warm up the Quinjet." said May, getting up. "Daisy, you go grab a shower and get changed. Everyone else, grab your gear."

She strode quickly to the door.

"Wheels up in 30. Or less."

CODA

Titan

As the blackness of the portal gave way to the ruined terraces of his home, Thanos felt a slight tug of melancholy at his soul.
If only they had listened, he thought. This could’ve been been avoided. We could’ve been happy. If only...

Thanos blinked at the red and blue caped Terran before him. Floating several feet off the ground.

Dr. Strange gazed serenely at the purple Titan.

"Oh, yeah. You're much more of a Thanos." he observed dryly.

Thanos paced easily towards the Terran, looking him over. There was a green glow from within the amulet.

Interesting...

"I take it the Maw is dead." Thanos sighed. "This day extracts a heavy toll. Still, he accomplished his mission."

Strange's gaze hardened, but he didn’t move.

"You may regret that. He brought you face-to-face with the Master of the Mystic Arts."

Thanos choked back a chuckle. The sheer arrogance of the human. This would be easier than back on Terra.

"And where do you think he brought you?" he inquired mildly, looking around the desolate landscape.

"Let me guess." Strange responded. "Your home?"

"It was." Thanos sighed again, gazing into a past only he could see. "And it was beautiful."

He turned to Strange.

"Titan was like most planets. Too many mouths, not enough to go around. And when we faced extinction, I offered a solution."

Strange floated closer to the ground.

"Genocide." he spat, stretching his legs underneath him.

Thanos lifted a finger. He had to try to make the man understand, before the seemingly inevitable struggle. It was only just.

"But random, dispassionate, fair to rich and poor alike. They called me a madman."

He waved his gauntleted hand around him. Strange noted, with a sinking heart, the presence of a new, orange stone in the glove.

"And what I predicted came to pass." Thanos finished.

"Congratulations, you're a prophet." snarked Strange.

He had to play for time...

"I'm a survivor." objected Thanos.
"Who wants to murder trillions." Strange responded.

Thanos sighed. This was getting him nowhere.

"With all six stones, I could simply snap my fingers." He mimicked the action. "They would all cease to exist. I call that mercy."

"And then what?"

The funny thing was Strange was almost interested in the answer. How do you follow up the destruction of half the known life in the universe? You certainly don't go to Disneyland....

"I'd finally rest...and watch the sun rise on a grateful universe."

It was so close, Thanos could see it, taste it.

"The hardest choices require the strongest wills." he finished, preparing to launch himself against the human.

Dr. Strange crossed his arms and steadied himself.

"I think you'll find our will equal to yours."

Thanos blinked.

"Our?"

Which is when a red and gold being hit him with most of the nearby hillside.

*So it began. Again*. Thanos thought, getting to his feet. *There could only be one way that it ended*...

He turned to face the new threat, and grinned.

*Bring it on...* he thought.

*Nothing can stop me now*....

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone...

"The hardest choices require the strongest wills." Is there any other Agents of SHIELD watcher who senses echoes of this in the S5 finale, particularly with what Phil does with the serum?

Next up, Team Cap touches down in Wakanda...and we finally have the meeting of some of the brightest minds in the MCU. (And I’m not talking about Tony & Bruce.)

P.S. Happy Thanksgiving to all! :)
Another Day, Another Destiny (One Day More)

Chapter Summary

The Avengers arrive in Wakanda to prepare for what might be Earth's final battle and to find a way to destroy the Mind Stone without killing Vision. It may take the combination of three of the smartest minds in the MCU to accomplish this (if they have enough time).

And Thor, Rocket Raccoon and Groot make their way to the ultimate god-killer...and discover more reasons for revenge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Wakanda

Okoye lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the rising sun. She scowled at the familiar Wakandan jet entering the city.

"When you said we were going to open Wakanda to the rest of the world...this is not what I imagined."

King T'Challa laughed quietly beside her.

"And what did you imagine?"

Okoye shrugged.

"The Olympics. Maybe even a Starbucks."

Sam Wilson returned the laugh as the jet touched down.

"There's no way the IOC would let you into the Games, lady."

Okoye glared at him.

"I was talking about hosting them. There seems to be a lack of contenders these days."

Sharon Carter grinned.

"She's got you there, birdbrain. Besides... Starbucks is overrated."

T'Challa huffed quietly as the ramp descended.

"I don't know, there's something to be said for a pumpkin spice latte in October..."

Sam and Sharon gazed at each other, horrified, as the Wakandans strode to meet the Avengers...
coming off the ramp.

"He didn't just **SAY** that, did he?" Sharon asked quietly.

"Guess everyone has something...must be from his university days." Sam replied, as they moved to join the others.

Steve Rogers was finishing shaking T'Challa's hand.

"Seems like I'm always thanking you for something." he finished.

Looking over his shoulder, his smile widened as he saw his friends.

"Sam..." he said, clapping the man on the shoulder. "Sharon."

Sam was about to tease his friends about their unromantic reunion, when his gaze was caught by the sight of Bruce Banner bowing before a bemused T'Challa. James Rhodes stood beside him, smirking.

"Uh, we don't do that here." T'Challa responded, motioning for Banner to rise.

Natasha snickered slightly beside Okoye, as Bruce flushed, realizing that he'd been played. He punched an openly laughing Rhodey, as the final members of the team walked off the ramp.

T'Challa smiled widely at the newcomers.

"Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz!"

He motioned for the two Agents to join them.

"My sister has been wanting to meet the infamous Fitzsimmons for quite some time. I regret it has to be under these circumstances."

Simmons returned the smile.

"Well, we've been wanting to get a look at Wakandan technology since you revealed yourself, your Majesty."

T'Challa's lips twisted a little.

"You and the rest of the world, I admit. I am hoping that between the three of you, we can come up with a solution for our android friend over there."

He turned back to Steve, as the group began to move towards the palace buildings.

"So how big of an assault can we expect?" he asked.

Bruce swallowed hard.

"Uh, sir, I think you can expect quite a big assault." he responded.

Steve raised an eyebrow as they got to the building's entrance.
"How we looking?"

T'Challa didn't pretend to misunderstand the question.

"You will have my King's Guard, the Border Tribe, the Dora Milaje, and..."

A figure detached himself from the shadows and approached the group.

"A semi-stable, 100-year-old man." finished Bucky Barnes.

Steve's smile lit up his face as he hugged his oldest friend.

"How you been, Buck?" he crowed, letting him go.

Bucky shrugged.

"Uh, not bad, for the end of the world." he replied.

Natasha leaned over to Okoye.

"Not to sound ungrateful...but it's the end of the world. That's all we can field?"

Okoye lifted an eyebrow.

"It will be enough."

Sharon joined the other two.

"The Wakandan council decided that fielding a smaller force that could work together would be of more value than trying to coordinate a multi-national force with all the infighting and politicing involved." Sharon explained, handing Natasha a tablet.

"Besides," added Okoye, "There is the small matter of the Sokavia Accords...and your current arrest warrants?"

She gave Natasha a tight smile.

"The council felt that the Avengers would be more useful than the American Special Op forces in Nigeria."

As Natasha scanned the strategy, she cocked her head.

"I hope you're right..." she sighed.

"Trust me, Black Widow." said Okoye. "We in Wakanda haven't lost a battle yet."

As Okoye turned and followed the rest of the group, Natasha and Sharon shared a quick glance of misgiving.

"Work with what we've been dealt..." murmured Sharon as they fell in step behind.
Agents Fitz and Simmons were in science heaven.

They drank in every bit of Wakandan technology around the lab as Vision arranged himself on the table, Wanda at his side. Every so often, Leo's eyes would widen, and Jemma realized that he had seen another arrangement or innovation that made intuitive sense to him.

Shuri watched the Agents with amusement. She had gotten the specs on the SHIELD technology that Tony Stark had shared with Wakanda after SHIELD's fall (the second time around), as well as some of the rest that he hadn't found (or just hadn't shared). It came the closest that she had seen to what they were working on in the labs here, and there were some fascinating implications from their work in VR and robotics.

These two Agents and her would get along just fine, she thought. If they had the time...

Shuri activated the scanner over Vision's Mind Stone. Fitz and Simmons moved over to examine the results with Bruce. The four scientists pondered over the data.

"Huh." said Fitz. "The structure is polymorphic."

Bruce nodded. "Right, we had to attach each neuron non-sequentially."

Shuri mentally facepalmed. The solution had been right there from the beginning.

"So, why didn't you just reprogram the synapses to work collectively?" she asked reasonably.

The three western scientists stared at the data, and then stared at her. She could almost see the light bulbs going off over their heads.

"Of course...." muttered Fitz.

"Because, we didn't think of it?" admitted Bruce.

Well, at least he didn't try to bluster his way around it, or dismiss it outright, like some of her college professors. Shuri decided to let him down easy.

"I'm sure you did your best."

Bruce flushed a little bit, and Shuri heard Natasha choke back a snicker.

"Can you do it?" asked Wanda, a little desperately.

Shuri turned her attention to Wanda.

"Yes, but there are more than two trillion neurons here. One misalignment could cause a cascade of circuit failures."

She swung her attention back to T'Challa, standing to the side with Steve.

"It will take time, brother."

Steve frowned a little.
"How long?"

*What part of trillion did the American not understand?* she thought.

She glanced over to younger Agents, who were shooting her sympathetic looks. She guessed that they had been under similar deadlines themselves.

"As long as you can give me." she replied.

Fitz reached out, and moved the synthetic data to his tablet, Simmons peering over his shoulder. Simon's eyes widened.

"What?" Shuri asked.

"Well, Vision was created from the combination of several different beings." Simmons returned. "Look at the interaction of the neurons."

Shuri took a second look at the data. Her eyebrows shot up as she saw the implications.

"Each set of neurons are already interacting separate from the others. JARVIS...Dr. Banner...Mr. Stark..." Simmons continued. "We could isolate each set and align them individually."

"Yes..." Shuri's respect for the Agents had grown. "That would speed things up. If we replicated the alignment system, could you two..."

The Agents shot each other a look.

"Of course, Princess Shuri." responded Fitz. "To be honest, this would be significantly easier than some of the work we've done over the last year. In fact, I think, I might be able to speed up your processing time, here and here."

Shuri looked at Fitz's changes to her schematics. How had they missed that?

Fitz shrugged.

"The Framework processors...they had to account for human speed of thought..." he noted. "It was still a work in progress."

"Just Shuri, Agent Fitz."

"Then just Fitz...and Simmons" responded Simmons.

"Set it up, sister." interrupted T'Challa. "We don't have much time left."

T'Challa took Steve aside as the three scientists continued to confer.

"We've just received word from your comrades in America." he said quietly. "Thanos struck there last night. He has the Soul Stone."

Steve closed his eyes and sighed.

"The rest of your Director Coulson's team, something happened...HYDRA related. There were
injuries."

"I thought the ATCU rooted the rest of them out?" whispered Natasha, joining the two men.

"Apparently General Talbot missed a couple." returned T'Challa. "Anyways, everyone who can be spared is on their way. Your Agent Johnson, Agent May. Hawkeye. But we cannot count on their getting here in time."

"We could really use some of those people from Kamar-Taj with their portals." noted Steve.

T'Challa shook his head.

"They've all retreated to the Sanctuaries. No one is answering."

He huffed a little.

"And they call us insular..."

Steve gave a grim smile.

"Well, we'll work with what we have."

T'Challa nodded.

"And hope that Strange can hold out. Wherever he is..."

---

**Nivadellir, Eitri's Forge**

Thor squared his shoulders and accepted his task.

"Allfathers, give me strength."

The dwarven blacksmith looked out at him in horror.

"You understand, boy? You're about to take the full force of a star. It'll kill you." screamed Eitri.

"Only if I die." Thor said through gritted teeth.

"Yes. That's what killing you means." he groaned.

From the jet, Rocket Racoon and Groot could only watch as Thor grasp the handholds of the mechanism and pulled. As the iris slowly opened, the two teammates had to turn their eyes away from the sudden stream of light that hit them.

The light shot out into the cold forge, slowly turning it a glowing red.

"Hold it! Hold it, Thor!" Eitri gasped.

On the planet, the dwarf counted the seconds as the metal melted. The ultimate weapon would do no one any good if no one could use it.

He tipped the cauldron impatiently, watching as the molten metal flowed into every nook of the mold.
As the last dropped settled, the light abruptly died. Eitri glanced up, and gasped as the unconscious Asgardian tipped over into space. He sighed as, with adept piloting, his animal companion maneuvered the jet underneath his falling body, catching him before it was too late.

The walking tree glanced up from his game as the pod landed near the forge, and Thor rolled heavily off of it.

Rocket Raccon didn't wait until his door was fully open. Ducking under the canopy, he rushed to Thor's side, kneeling down beside him. Groot stood a short distance away, observing.


He glanced at Eitri, and swallowed hard.

"I think...he's dying." the animal whispered.

Eitri saw the death of all their hopes stretched out before them.

"He needs the axe! Where's the handle?" He shot a look at Groot. "Tree, help me find the handle!"

Groot looked around, but no handle was to be seen. He bowed his head, knowing what he needed to do.

Eitri and Rocket stared as Goot quietly dropped the game. His arm grew longer, and longer, the wood weaving itself around the glowing axe head and hammer, bringing them firmly together, and leaving a solid handle for the user. He hesitated, then, concentrating fiercely, cut the extra wood from him.

Rocket winced, but met Groot's eyes. He hoped his gaze conveyed the pride in his younger friend, for doing what had to be done. There was the makings of his old friend in the young sapling.

Rocket just needed to deep space that game.

Groot gave back a small smile.

Thor's hand opened slightly. The hammer rose, rotating in the air. Then, it flew home, and Thor's fingers contracted around it.

A bolt of lightening struck. When Rocket could see again, Thor stood before them, healthy and whole.

"Good dwarf, I thank you. Rabbit, Groot, to me. We must gather my brother and fly to battle!"

Gathering Rocket and Groot in his arms, he raised the axehammer. In a bolt of light, the trio disappeared.

CODA
Black Order Prison Ship

As the remnants of the teleportation faded from their view, the three friends gazed about in horror.
The ship was deathly silent, lights flickering in the corridors. Bodies lay where they had fallen, unarmed, unseeing.

"I am Groot."

"Yeah, buddy. Stick close."

They made their way to what had been the dais of the room. Rocket spotted a terminal, and waved Groot over to it to learn what they could.

Thor looked around. At the front, there was a clearing. 7 or 8 bodies were spaced out in a semi-circle.

Around one still, slender black haired body.

"NO!"

Thor went to his knees beside Loki, taking him in his arms.

"I am Groot." Groot whispered in horror from the terminal, staring at Rocket.

Rocket pulled his tree friend into his arms for a moment, giving him what comfort he could. Then he pulled away.

"Stay here." he ordered.

Groot merely nodded, too shaken for his usual backtalk.

The raccoon joined the weeping Asgardian.

"Thor, Groot accessed the main terminal."

Thor bowed his head.

"The prisoners, they staged a revolt. The Black Order put it down...but Thanos gave orders."

Rocket swallowed the gorge that rose in his throat.

"He didn't need the ship anymore. He had the Stones...he didn't need hostages."

Thor remained silent, waiting for Rocket to finish.

"Thor...he gave orders for all prisoners on board to be executed."

"All? Including the children?"

Rocket bowed his head.

"I'm...sorry..."

Thor lifted his head. A cold, cold rage filled the Asgardian's eyes, and lightening flickered from his weapon. Rocket instinctively took a step back.
Thor snarled one question.

"WHERE IS THANOS?"

Chapter End Notes

Welp. Now Thor knows what's happened to Loki and the Asgardians (excepting Valkyrie). This can't be good...

And Fitzsimmons & Shuri - that's a meeting I've been trying to get to for a while now over a couple of different fics. Who knows what trouble the three of them could get into. Once (if) we get past Thanos, of course.

Next up...Clint Barton and the gang are flying to Wakanda as fast as they can. They have some time to reflect on the past 24 hours. Maybe a little too much time...

(P.S. Writer's hat on - yes, I've jumped over large portions of Thor/Guardians plotline from the movie. The rationale is that most of the space scenes wouldn't have changed with the addition of the Agents of SHIELD characters. And I didn't want to do a full transcription of the movie...so consider most of that happening off screen.)
Over the Sea

Chapter Summary

Clint Barton and the North American heroes are racing to reach Wakanda in time. It leaves them with a little too much time on their hands.

Speaking of time...just how are Tony and his group doing on Titan?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

QuinJet, Northern Atlantic

Clint Barton frowned at the jet's controls.

"You can't make this thing go any faster, Clint."

Melinda May sat in the co-pilot chair. She had just barely lost the race to the seat back at the mansion. She knew she'd take over for the last leg in African airspace.

"The hell I can't..." Clint snarled back, considering the gauges. If he just adjusted the fuel ratio...

"We can't help them from the bottom of the ocean, Clint. We'll get there."

Melinda May studied her old friend.

"It's not your fault, Clint." May said quietly.

Clint set his jaw, and continued to fiddle with the gauges.

May leaned forward.

"Talk to me, Barton."

Clint hesitated, then slumped back in his seat.

"You know how many times in the last five years I've wanted to hear that?" he asked. "How many times I've wished Coulson was there to keep everything from going to hell? Again?"

He stared out the window.

"I thought he was lucky to miss out on the whole HYDRA thing. Thought it would have killed him to see what we...the Avengers...became without him. Tony and Cap at each other's throat all the time."

He looked at May.

"And Phil was there, all the time. Just under the surface or around the next corner. And while I was on the farm, or trying to deal with all the petty snarking and sniping...he probably needed my help.
He got his fucking arm chopped off, that was the least of things. And I didn't know."

May shook her head.

"We couldn't tell you..."

"And then today," Clint continued, "The Rider...I wanted to kill him before he got to Coulson. Instead, he got back inside my HEAD, May. No one's done that since..."

Clint trailed off for a moment, then clenched his fist and continued.

"He made me relive every sin I've ever committed, every time I let someone down. And to top it all off, I was trapped, and you had to choose. Between the world and my kids. And I couldn't help them."

He looked at her.

"Thank you." he said. "For making the wrong choice."

May rubbed her forehead.

"It wasn't the wrong choice, Clint. It was the only choice. If I hadn't given up the Stone, Thanos would have killed them, and then us all. And...I had to kill a child once. To save my team. I swore I'd never do that again."

Clint was silent for a moment.

"I can't be too late again, May. I can't let Cap down."

May sighed.

"No one knows the future, Clint. Maybe we make it...maybe we don't. Maybe we're meant for another fight, the one that comes after this."

She leaned forward.

"None of this is on you. We all made our choices, Phil included. They weren't always right...but they were right at the time. And we live with the consequences of those choices. I've lived in a world where we all made different choices, Clint. I find that I...can live with...what I helped to create with the ones I made here."

May stood up.

"Second guesses doesn't get you anywhere. Concentrate on the now. That we're going to get to Wakanda. And then we're going to kick Thanos' ass."

Clint leaned back as May exited the cockpit.

"When did you get so inspirational?" he asked. "You never were the one that people brought their problems to."

May didn't turn around.

"When I saved a girl, Barton. In Bahrain."
In the main body, Robbie Reyes stared out the window.

Flick. Flick. Flick.

Across from him, Valkyrie cracked open an eye.

"Quit that, or your keys will wind up in the ocean."

Robbie stilled.

"I'd like to see you try it."

He paused, considering his current situation.

"On the other hand, maybe not."

Valkyrie gave a small smirk.

"Wise decision."

Robbie put his keys in his jacket pocket, and sighed.

"Get some rest, friend Robbie."

"That's the problem. I haven't needed to rest in years. I think I might have forgotten how."

Valkyrie groaned.

"Close your eyes. Put your hands at your side. And stay still."

Silence. Then Valkyrie heard the rustling of fabric over leather. She considered helping the Midgardian sleep, but then realized that they may need to be conscious at a moment's notice. She relaxed her hand on her sword pommel.

She opened her eyes and glared at the younger man.

Robbie looked sheepish.

"Sorry. It's just...The Rider's been with me for so long. My goals turned into his."

He paused for a moment.

"What happens if we can't get him back?" he asked.

"Then you have your life, friend Reyes. And you make a new set of goals. Perhaps with that pretty Midgardian Inhuman on board?"

"Who, Daisy? Nah...I don't think she'll ever forgive me for the deal Coulson made with the Rider."

Robbie leaned forward.

"After all I've seen, throughout the dimensions we've fought in, all I've done...I don't think I can go back to being a mechanic in East LA. But I'm not sure what to do next."

"Ah. I remember a time when my purpose was taken away, and I too was at loose ends." Valkyrie mused.
"What did you do?"

Valkyrie shrugged.

"I became a bounty hunter for the Grandmaster, and attempted to drink myself to death every night."

She lifted an eyebrow.

"I don't recommend it."

"No...I would guess not."

She leaned forward.

"Trust me, Robbie. I have seen many souls come and go in my time. And I have seen bonded souls like yours before. Yours was one of the fiercest bonds I have ever seen. It...glowed...like fire. I have no doubt that if the bond can be re-established, he will come."

Robbie gave her a small smile.

"I hope so, chica."

"Now...close your eyes..."

May found her in the back of the jet.

"Didn't you try this once before?" she asked the figure curled up on the ground.

Daisy huffed slightly.

"Circumstances are a little different." she muttered.

May sat down beside her.

"Don't tell me you're feeling guilty over Coulson."

Daisy leaned against the other woman, and May put her arm around her.

"Everyone I care for winds up dead, May."

May sighed.

"Everyone dies, Daisy. Whether you care for them or not. It's part of life. It has nothing to do with you...unless you were the one pulling the trigger."

"I should have gone with you and Coulson."

"That wasn't your mission."

"Yeah, well, on my mission, Yo-Yo..."

"That was the Hales, not you."

May forced Daisy to look at her.

"Don't take on the weight of the world. It will crush you in the end."
The younger woman gave a slight smile.

"Pot, meet kettle."

May nodded.

"Exactly."

They sat in silence for a moment, drawing comfort from each other.

"May?"

"Mmm?"

"Last time I did this...you said that Coulson would come for me. Always. And you were right. But now?"

"Hey." May said fiercely. "None of that. This is not forever."

"What if it is, this time?"

"We **ARE** going to get Phil back. And then, after a couple of days, we are going to kick his ass for making these decisions without us."

"We?"

May smirked.

"I think there's a line. It starts behind me. And then maybe Nat. You can be third, if you want."

"Maybe." Daisy thought about it some more. "Yeah. He's got to stop pulling that whole self-sacrificing crap."

"You're telling me." said a new voice.

The women looked up to see Clint standing over top of them. He looked down at Daisy.

"Didn't we do this before?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow, and extending a hand.

"So I've been told." Daisy sighed, grabbing it, and lifting herself up.

Clint didn't let go of her hand.

"I told you. We're family. And we look out for each other. Now more than ever."

May got up off the floor. Clint nodded at her.

"Piper's on holocom up front."

The three made their way to the main body. Valkyrie and Robbie were standing by the screen.

"...you didn't know, right?" Piper demanded, hands on her hips.

Robbie rubbed at his forehead.

"No, I wasn't involved at the time." he shot back.
Daisy lifted her eyebrows and coughed.

"Agent Johnson!" said Piper. "Agent Barton, Agent...May..."

Valkyrie smirked a little at the slight catch in the name.

"What do you have, Piper?" asked Daisy.

"Senator Thompson just got off the phone with the NSA and NASA." Piper reported. "We have incoming."

"I'm going to assume we mean of the worst kind?" asked May.

Piper nodded.

"Sending you the data now." she said, pushing a button in front of her.

Clint grabbed the tablet and began scrolling through the data quickly.

"Initial images show the ships to be similar to the one that touched down in New York." Piper noted.

"DAMN IT." Clint yelled in frustration, throwing the tablet across the plane.

Everyone stopped and stared at him. He ran his hand through his hair.

"All of them have the same trajectory for their landing point. It's Wakanda."

He sagged against the wall.

"We've run out of time."

They all looked at each other in dismay.

Daisy ran her hand over her eyes, then stopped suddenly.

"Maybe...not..." she said slowly.

She looked at Clint.

"How soon can you get us down?"

Clint narrowed his eyes.

"Does it have to be on land?"

---

**CODA**

**Titan**

Each breath was harder than the one before.

Some leader he turned out to be, thought Tony Stark, dragging himself upright. They nearly had it off...nearly had it...

And then Star-Lord decided to do a little *avenging* of his own. He couldn't blame him. If had been Pepper, he'd probably do the same thing.
Now his team lay scattered, defeated on Titan’s surface. He couldn’t see Peter. His Aunt May was gonna kill him. Tony thought that wouldn’t be a worry for much longer.

He wondered, as Thanos towered over him, how long Dr. Strange could keep the Stone away from him. Why he hadn’t used his portals to get out of there?

He looked up. Waayyy up.

"You throw...another moon at me...and..I’m gonna lose it..."

"Stark.” rumbled Thanos.

"You know me?”

Hey, guess his name got around too. Tony thought. Take that, Agent Agent...

"I do. You’re not the only one cursed with knowledge.” Thanos sneered, leaning over him.

"My only...curse...is you.”

One last act of defiance, give Strange time to escape. Tony whipped the jagged pieces of his cut armour across the titan’s face.

It didn’t even phase him. The cut was minuscule. Thanos lifted his hand to his face, then examined it.

“All that for a drop of blood?” Thanos huffed. “You have my respect, Stark.”

He lifted Tony off his feet easily, and turned the ragged edges in towards him, creating a spear to impale him with.

Hoist on my own petard...Tony thought. A little too ironic, I really do think.

His world shrunk to the purple face before him.

“When I’m done, half of humanity will still be alive. I hope they remember you.”

Thanos grasped the spear.

I’m sorry, Pepper...so sorry...

Tony closed his eyes reflexively.

From a distance he heard, “Stop.”

He opened his eyes to see Strange approach.

"Spare his life, and I will give you the stone.”

"No...” whispered Tony.

Thanos narrowed his eyes.

"No tricks.”

"Don’t...” pleaded Tony.

Strange turned the amulet over, and the green time stone fell into Thanos’ hand.
Thanos dropped Tony to the ground. Strange immediately moved to support him, his eyes never leaving the Titan.

Thanos placed the Time Stone in the Gauntlet. He gave a pleased smile.

"One to go."

A portal opened, and Thanos strode through it without a backwards glance.

As it closed, the Guardians and Peter began to get to their feet in a daze.

Tony looked up at Strange.

"Why?" He gasped. "Why would you do that?"

Strange looked at him, and there was a mix of sadness and pity in his eyes.

"It was the only way."

As Tony stared at him, uncomprehendingly, Strange nodded gently.

"We're in the endgame now."

Chapter End Notes

Sigh. Some things just don't change. And now we are down to one stone.

And where has Barton given Daisy a pep talk before? (Hint, check Chapter 25 of the Tie that Binds).

Next up...we know all about the heroes amassing in Wakanda. But what about those who stayed behind? One final stop before the Battle of Wakanda begins...

P.S. Are Agents of SHIELD fans taking note of the effects of the Framework on Mack and May in this story? Hmm...I wonder who else was affected...(Hope our Agents don't have problems with Doctors. Uh oh...)

*Writer's note: I'm glad everyone's enjoying this fic. So, got a question for all of you. If you had to choose, which would you rather see: the after effects of reneging on Katherine Hale's Confederacy "deal" (A certain Captain may have to become involved) or a time travel section with Deke, Tess and Flint from S5 Agents of SHIELD (hey, combining the groups opens up lots of possibilities for the "Destroyer of Worlds" title). Let me know...*
**Interlude: Saint Crispin's Day**

**Chapter Summary**

With Thanos' army quickly approaching, those not in Wakanda can only watch. And only some of them know what's truly at stake.

**Chapter Notes**

"And gentlemen in England now a-bed  
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day."


See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Washington, DC**

Senator Jason Thompson looked at the incoming trajectories on the screen as they approached Earth.

"You said that Wakanda declined our assistance."

Agent Piper slumped on the couch.

"Agent Carter reported in. Said that Wakanda would rather have a unified fighting force than deal with outsiders who would not cede authority in the field."

She rubbed her hand over her eyes.

"Also, it didn't help that the head of US forces in Africa has a shoot-on-sight order for Cap and his team. Guess they didn't want any accidents."

Thompson fiddled with the mementos on his desk.

"You got in touch with Agent Johnson and her team?" he asked, for what was the third time.

Piper looked up, and, patiently, gave him the same answer.

"Yes, sir. But they are still en route over the Atlantic. Daisy said she might have a way, but..."

"It would take a miracle."

Piper didn't respond. After everything that had happened the last couple of years, she had lost a lot of
faith in miracles. She knew she was lucky to still be alive.

"Agent Piper..."

The Senator trailed off. Piper waited, not moving.

"What do I...we..do now?"

"Want the truth, Senator?"

He hesitated.

"Yes."

Piper got to her feet, and walked quietly over to the desk. She pulled the Senator to his feet.

"Go, Jason. Pull your kids out of school. Take them home, order a pizza or something. Don't turn on the TV, put on a movie. Hold your wife. And wait. This will all be over, one way or another, tonight."

"I can't leave..."

"I can hold down the fort here."

She gave him a sad smile.

"Last line of defense and all that."

He opened his mouth.

"Jason. We might die tonight. Do you really want to spend your last hours here?"

He shut it.

"Go."

Thompson looked at her for a moment, then gave her a salute.

"Thank you...for your service, Agent Piper."

Thompson turned, grabbed his coat, and headed out the door.

Piper didn't watch him go. She kept watch as the circles descended closer and closer to Wakanda.

United Kingdom

Brian Braddock stood vigil over the arch between the realities.

Meghan entered the doorway and watched her love quietly.

"Come join me?" he asked softly.
She made no sound as she padded towards him. He reached out, and pulled her to his side, his eyes never leaving the arch.

"It's begun." she noted. "UK Space Agency just reported incoming. They're headed towards Wakanda."

He nodded, and they stood in silence for awhile.

"Peter, Betsy?" he asked

"Peter said if it was the end of the world, he'd ride it out at the pub."

Brian huffed in amusement.

"Betsy...she asked to be sedated until tomorrow."

"She couldn't bear to feel half the universe die," Brian replied. "She might have the right of it."

"Love...not going with them...did we make the right choice?"

He briefly glanced at her. In his mind’s eye, he saw a future where his lover disintegrated into ash before his eyes. Where his sister went mad with the screams of the survivors ringing through her dreams. Where he and Pete Wisdom were left to protect a stunned and demoralized Great Britain as best as they could.

But then he saw another future, where he and Steve Rogers were enough to halt Thanos…but were shortly torn apart by the forces coming through the arch, the multiple universes falling one by one to the darkness that could not be checked.

And he saw a third future, one where the sun shone down on them all equally.

He kissed her, gently, knowing it might be the last time. It all depended on the Avengers now.

"It was the only choice."

---

**San Francisco**

Scott Lang pulled the van onto the rooftop.

"What kept you?" snarked Henry Pym, setting up his equipment.

"Needed coffee." he replied unrepentantly. "If you're going to send me through that thing, I'm going to need all the sustenance I can get."

Hope Van Dyne smirked from her mother's side.

"Don't tell me you're scared, Scotty..."

"Sure, your Dad's sending me into a portal which I don't have any way to return from. What's to be scared about?"
Janet Van Dyne looked over at the man she had (briefly) shared a bond with.

"Don't worry, Scott. We'll keep Hank in line."

"I wouldn't make any promises you can't keep, dear..." replied Hank. "Might be a good way to..

"Daad..." warned Hope. "You know you love him."

Scott beamed. Hank snorted.

"Like I love a hole in my head..."

Hope went to Scott's side.

"Don't listen to him sweetie. Trust me, we'll bring you home."

Scott pulled her closer.

"I do." he said, kissing her. "Trust you, that is. The only way I'm stepping in there is if you're out here to bring me home."

"Get a room!" called Hank, his eyes on his data.

"Besides, Ava needs the quantum energy." Hope continued, ignoring her dad. "It's the only thing keeping her sane."

"Yeah, I know."

He rested his head against hers.

"Movie night, tonight?" he asked.

"With Cassie?" Hope asked, grinning. "Sounds great. I pick."

Scott rolled his eyes.

"Death by B-Movie..." he groaned.

"But what a way to go." she quipped back.

"What a way, indeed..." he responded, kissing her again.

---

Ottawa, Canada

The Honourable Chrysta Freeland, Minister for Foreign Affairs paused before knocking on the door.

She opened it cautiously.

"Mr. Prime Minister?" she asked.
The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau looked up. His face was sombre as he waved her in.

She shut the door behind her.

"Can you reach them?" he asked, as she took a seat.

She shook her head.

"There's something jamming communications that has settled over the entire Nunavut area, sir. I would suspect that is what Commander Hudson and his team are dealing with now."

"And those left behind, in the Kananaskis Valley?"

"Sir...I checked in with them. They are dealing with 5 newly created Inhumans, one of which could go unstable at any moment. And besides, those with transport powers went with James. There is no way they could reach Wakanda in time."

"Of course not." Trudeau sighed.

They sat in silence for a moment.

"I made a mistake." he admitted.

"Sir, you couldn't have seen..."

"I could have trusted a friend." he interrupted. "Instead, I let my grief at my niece's death and anger at Tony Stark affect my judgement. We could have pulled Alpha Flight back, sent them to New York and Wakanda and now..."

He put his chin on his hand.

"Now, Tony Stark is missing, off planet. And Wakanda is about be invaded by more of these aliens. I have no clue as to why or what they are after. And we've missed our window to help."

"Sir...if Alpha Flight had gone overseas, then who would be dealing with whatever it is up north?" Freeland asked him.

"Perhaps it could've waited."

"Yes, but what if it couldn't? We might be seeing an invasion from the north now if Alpha Flight wasn't up there."

"Who in their right mind would want to start an invasion from the Arctic Circle?" Trudeau responded.

They were silent for a moment.

"Sir, maybe this would be a good time to review the American proposal to the United Nations? While it definitely has...interesting...implications for us...there might be something to be said about working together." she suggested.

He nodded.
"Leave it with me, Chrysta. I'll review it tonight."

She knew a dismissal when she heard one.

"Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister."

---

New Avengers Mansion

"Everyone tucked in?" asked Lance Hunter.

"Yep, they're not going anywhere." responded Bobbi Morse.

They looked at each other, and then at the screen in the control room.

"It's beginning." she noted.

"Yeah." replied Hunter.

"Can't believe that they left us behind." snarked Bobbi, not looking at her partner.

"Someone had to stay. I admit, I would have rather it been those gits Clint and Robbie...but we were the next best choices."

Hunter went to Bobbi's side and put his arm around her.

"I have to admit, love," he continued. "If I had to face the end of the world, I'm glad I'm here with you."

She looked at him.

"Even after everything?" she asked quietly.

"Especially after everything," he responded.

They kissed, deepening and heating as they clung together in the deserted control room.

"OK," Hunter said a little breathlessly as they broke. "Can I just say I would have rathered our last time be somewhere other than a desk at work? Somewhere warm, tropical, white sandy beaches..."

"Drug cartel assassins breaking into our room halfway through..." Bobbi noted, working on his shirt.

"You have a point, love." he admitted.

"Overnight cot's in the back." she suggested.

"Mmm..."

As they pulled each other to the cot, Hunter drew back a little.

"Bobbi?" he asked seriously.
"Yeah?"

"If...by some strange chance...they don't come through...and you wind up on the other side..."

He swallowed hard.

"Wait for me?"

Bobbi's quip died on her tongue at the look in her partner's eyes.

She nodded.

"I will. Always."

Then his arms were around her, their lips met, and they tried to forget about what was happening on the other side of the world.

Elsewhere in the mansion, General Katherine Hale sat on her cot.

She had tried to save the world. Well, save it for HYDRA, but save it nonetheless.

Now, she was trapped in a cell, watching the last minutes of the world tick by.

"Mom?"

Ruby Hale slumped against their adjoining wall.

"Yes, dear?"

"It's over, isn't it?"

General Hale thought for a moment. No matter what happened in the next couple of days, it was over for her. Her daughter? Maybe, if Daisy succeeded, they would be merciful. Then again, maybe if Ruby hadn't gone off half cocked at the base, things would've been different.

"Yes, darling."

She walked over, and sat beside Ruby on her side of the wall.

"Are we gonna die?"

She prided herself on being as truthful as she could with her daughter.

"I don't know."

A tear slipped down Ruby's pale cheek.

"I don't want to go, Mom."

"I know."
The last two members of HYDRA sat in the silence together.

General Hale offered up one quiet plea to a god she didn't believe in.

*Please...not my daughter...Please...*

CODA

Wakanda

Steve turned from his conversation with T'Challa and Nat, and focused in on Sam Wilson's words.

The blast echoed over the com line.

"Hey, Cap, we got a situation here."

Chapter End Notes

That Shakespeare quote at the beginning is better known for the immediately proceeding lines:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition."

I've always wondered what the rest of the world did while Wakandans/Avengers fought Thanos.

As always, real life references are meant with the greatest of respect. (Why is the Canadian Prime Minister angry with Tony? Err...check out the Tie that Binds for the adventures of his Inhuman niece, Cassie.)

And now...we're here. The Battle of Wakanda begins next chapter.

Whether or not Team Daisy and the rest make it.

*Updated Author's note - Oct 29, 2018*: This chapter was written two weeks ago. With the events occurring across the United States last week, I find myself uneasy about the HYDRA Hales section. I was trying to emulate Agents of SHIELD S5 in showing General Hale's maternal feelings for Ruby...but in no way do I want to endorse a "normalization" of those who follow the ideology of HYDRA and their real life counterparts. Please let me know if any of you feel that I crossed that line, and I will delete that section with wholehearted and humble apologies.
We Got A Situation Here

Chapter Summary

In Wakanda, the Black Order has arrived. T’Challa and the Avengers must buy time for the others to map Vision and destroy the Mind Stone.

And over the Atlantic Ocean, Daisy Johnson and her team make one last... Inhuman effort to arrive in time to help.

(Oh, and who called for a Doctor?)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wakanda

Sam Wilson peered up into the sky. He had seen those circular vessels before. He thumbed the com unit.

Guess they had just run out of time.

"Hey, Cap," he reported, "we got a situation here."

He and Bucky instinctively winced as the first couple of alien craft dropped down, their intent clear. As the first one shattered against the Wakandan force fields, Bucky gave a slight whoop.

"God, I love this place." he cheered, watching as the parts slid down the bubble surrounding the city.

Sam shook his head as he saw others veer off, attempting to find the boundaries.

"Yeah, don't start celebrating yet, guys."

He frowned, as he started counting the craft descending from the blue skies above him.

"We got more incoming outside the dome." he finished reporting.

Bucky turned to Sam.

"Let's head to the assembly point. I've got point on Steve."

"Oh, hell no..." Sam grumbled, as the two men loped off to meet the rest of the Wakandan army.

From the Wakandan science centre, Vision stood beside Wanda Maximoff and Jemma Simmons as they watched the black circles approach. He saw the young scientist flinch as another of the enemy ships got too close to the defense shield, bursting into flame.

"Simmons," called Shuri. "I think we're ready to begin."
Simmons swallowed hard, and returned to look over Leo Fitz's shoulder at the readouts.

Vision watched as Wanda reflexively flexed her fingers, the red chaos sparks dancing between them. His mind synapses recalled his lover on the pavement back in England, a spear point embedded in her throat.

He shook his head. The stakes were considerably higher now. And there was no guarantee that Shuri and the Agents could set him free in time.

Vision turned to face Captain Rogers.

"It's too late." he said quietly. "We need to destroy the stone now."

Wanda scowled, taking a deep breath. Surprisingly, it was Natasha Romanoff who responded.

"Vision," Nat said calmly, "get your ass back on the table."

The android met her eyes for a moment, then acquiesced, heading over to the lab bench, settling himself under the scanner.

Natasha, he mused, was still a SHIELD Agent at her core. They saved lives. He hoped she was right to save his.

Shuri, Simmons and Fitz took their places at the computers surrounding him and began the process. Wanda relaxed slightly, maintaining her position by the window.

As Nat headed towards the door, T'Challa turned to his sister, giving her a brief hug around the shoulders.

"We will hold them off." he promised her.

Shuri nodded, already deep in concentration, refining her work processes for speed.

Steve caught Wanda's eyes. She brought herself up to attention.

"Wanda, as soon as the stone's out of his head...you blow it to hell." he ordered grimly.

"I will."

As Nat, Steve and T'Challa hurried down the corridors to meet their forces, T'Challa knew there was little time to waste.

"Evacuate the city." he ordered through the com line. "Engage all defense procedures."

He briefly gazed at Steve. There was something missing...something important. All at once, it hit him.

T'Challa grabbed a Wakandan soldier going by. She came to attention immediately, as he pointed at Steve.

"And get this man a shield."
The Wakandan lab was silent, except for the steady hum of the machines. Leo Fitz put himself into a semi-trance, as he scanned, separated and sorted the layers of the android in front of him. He flinched slightly at a muffled explosion that could be heard through the open window.

"This is a fool's errand." came an unwelcome burr beside him.

"Shut up." Fitz muttered under his breath.

Shuri cocked an eyebrow, her fingers never pausing.

"Sorry," Fitz said. "Just a voice in my mind."

"Coward." it sneered.

Fitz's eyes flicked to the side.

The Doctor stood there, in his three piece suit, shined shoes, hair slicked back in place, his father's glower directed at him.

"You mean to tell me," he demanded, "you're actually going to go along with this? Christ, even the bloody robot is smarter than you."

Fitz ignored him. He had been getting a lot of practice at that.

"It is a robot. A machine." the Doctor observed coldly. "Between the three of you, you could probably create him again once this was all over. Well, maybe they could. You..."

"Yes, another robot." Fitz whispered. "But not Vision. No one could ever replicate him... he's..."

"Not ALIVE!!" the Doctor screamed at him. "You would risk everyone in the universe for a handful of metal and wires?"

"He's more than that." Fitz argued. "He is a unique life form...what he's made of doesn't matter."

"Oh, are we stressed?" mocked his counterpart.

Fitz flushed.

"You're actually right, your bleedin' soft heart." the Doctor scoffed. "One...lifeform...organic or metal doesn't matter. Shouldn't matter, anyways. All of you, from your Director Coulson to Captain America on down to that red-headed..."

"Don't say it..." Fitz warned.

Simmons glanced at him, concerned.

"Or what are you gonna do about it?" the Doctor cocked his head. "Nothing? Thought so. As I was saying, one lifeform shouldn't matter when weighed against the needs of the universe. But all of you are too soft to do anything about it."

The Doctor grinned at him, showing bone white teeth.
"It's a good thing, then, that I'm here. I can do what needs to be done. What you can't."

Fitz whirled on him.

"Get out of here!"

Wanda turned sharply, looking about the room.

"Agent Fitz?" she asked.

"Leo?" asked Jemma, hesitating.

"Deal with your partner, Simmons." Shuri ordered, not breaking her workflow. "Come back when you two are ready."

"No..." replied Fitz. "Keep going, Jemma. I can deal with him."

The three women exchanged looks.

There was no one else in the lab.

The morning sun beat down on the Wakandan plain, as the last carriers brought the battle leaders to the front. Natasha felt the breeze whip through her hair, as she marked the scenery going by. She looked over at Steve and Bucky, calmly watching the battlelines drawing closer.

"You're a spy, not a soldier. Now you want to wade into a war?"

She laughed quietly to herself. She and Clint had come a long way since Loki on the Helicarrier and New York. Now, she was present at what might actually be the last war on Earth. She wished for a moment that Clint had made it over, but he had a family that needed him now. It wasn't just the two of them now. Maybe it was better this way. She still missed him at her side.

She had a feeling this was going to be worse than Budapest.

A glint of red and gold got her attention, and her lips quirked as she watched Bruce lumber clumsily across the landscape. His attempts at reaching the Hulk since Dr. Strange had been taken had failed, and Tony's Hulkbuster suit was supposed to give them time to...reconnect.

She thumbed her com.

"How we looking, Bruce?"

Bruce glanced over.

"Yeah," he responded, "I think I'm getting the hang of it."

He leaped forward, the suit carrying him ahead of the speeders.

"Wow!" he cheered. "It's like being the Hulk without actually..."

The suit lurched forward as an unseen boulder impacted the suit's knee, faceplanting Bruce on the Wakandan plains.
Natasha bit back a chuckle. Okoye rolled her eyes and threw Bruce a dubious look as their speeder passed them.

Getting up, he gave a wave.

"I'm okay." he called. Then he looked towards their destination.

"I'm okay." he repeated, more to himself.

As they passed the front line of the warriors, T'Challa was greeted with a Jubari war cry. He stopped and greeted his old rival, now friend.

"Thank you for standing with us." T'Challa said.

M'Baku inclined his head.

"Of course, brother." he responded.

T'Challa joined with Steve and Natasha and walked to the edge of the purple barrier. The beings who had attacked Wanda and Vision stood there waiting. They looked as if they did this every day.

"Nat," hissed Bruce through the coms, "There should be at least one more. Where are the bastards that attacked us in New York?"

Nat approached the barrier, and stopped on the other side of the female alien. As Steve and T'Challa moved to flank her, she cocked her head and smirked.

"Where's your other friend?" she asked.

Steve's eyes narrowed, but remained silent, backing her play.

Proxima Midnight glared at Natasha.

"You will pay for his life with yours." she ground out.

_Gotcha, _Nat thought. _One confirmed down._

She spared a quick thought for Tony Stark, mentally thanking him for taking at least one of them out of the battle.

"Thanos will have that stone." Proxima finished.

Steve moved slightly forward. Obsidian Cole moved with him, mimicking his stance beside his partner.

"That's not gonna happen." observed Steve.

T'Challa took his position on the other side of Natasha. He surveyed them all with a calm, regal look.

"You are in Wakanda now. Thanos will have nothing but dust and blood." he promised them.

Proxima smirked.
"We...have blood to spare."

She raised her right arm, holding her spear and gave an unearthly battle cry. Behind her, several of the alien ships rolled forward, their hatches opening. The beings inside scuttled forward, blades in their hand moving menacingly.

Without a word, and as one, T’Challa, Steve, Natasha turned their backs on the aliens, and calmly, showing no emotion, returned to their front line.

Bucky raised an eyebrow. This Steve Rogers was very familiar to him, just the venue had moved further south. Steve glanced at him, and his lips quirked slightly, wordlessly acknowledging the situation.

"Did they surrender?" Bucky asked.

Steve shook his head.

"Not exactly." he replied.

_Yep, Bucky thought, Just like the old days..._

---

**Avenger's Jet, Atlantic Ocean**

"Taking her down on auto..." reported Clint Barton. "Now, you want to tell us why?"

Daisy Johnson swallowed hard.

"I don't want the plane to accidentally hit something if we weren't on it."

She looked over at Melinda May.

"Mack, back at the school, he ran into this dog one of the kids had. It could teleport."

May's eyes widened as Daisy continued.

"It brought over its owner, Bobbi and Hunter to help free everyone. The owner, she gave me this ring. Said if we needed help, to call."

"And so you're going to call the dog?" asked Robbie Reyes dubiously.

"There are many ways to transport within the Nine." mused Valkyrie. "But even I have not travelled by dog before."

"So what do you do? Whistle?" quipped Clint.

Daisy shook her head, as May gently picked up her hand, and examined the ring.

"They didn't really say...all we had to do was call...AGGGH!!"

A large, cold wet nose brushed against Daisy's neck. Turning, their eyes widened at the sight of the large, brown bulldog now occupying a good portion of the jet's interior. His laughing, intelligent
eyes danced at the sight of Daisy, and the strange fork standing up from his forehead seemed to hum to some strange force.

Daisy racked her brain.

...*His name...what was his name...*

"Lockjaw?" she asked.

Lockjaw woofed happily, and started to turn over for a belly rub.

"Don't you dare!" snapped May. "There's not enough room up here!"

Lockjaw immediately sat at her tone. He turned sad eyes to Daisy.

"Good boy." Daisy responded.

Lockjaw's lips turned up in a doggy grin.

"*Dios mios...*" muttered Robbie. "That's one big dog."

Lockjaw sniffed at him in response, and growled softly.

"Lockjaw, can you take all of us?"

He woofed happily.

"Do you have a range?"

Lockjaw's head cocked, but stayed still, waiting.

Daisy looked at May, who shrugged.

"Lockjaw, we need to get to Wakanda...our friends are in danger, they're being..."

Suddenly, a vision of a Wakandan plain, a city just off in the distance, filled Daisy's mind. That was strange, since she had never been to Wakanda.

"I...think so?"

Lockjaw panted for a couple of moments. The fork from his forehead shuddered, and he flickered slightly.

Lockjaw whined sharply, and the image returned...covered by a large purple barrier.

"You can't get us through a barrier?"

Clint cursed sharply.

"The Wakandan defenses. They include a force field around the country."

He looked at Lockjaw.
"Has the battle started?" he asked.

The dog whined again, shoving his muzzle under Daisy's hand. She gave him a scratch behind his ears.

"Can you keep watch?" she asked the dog.

No response.

"I'll go up front and monitor." said Clint, turning towards the cockpit.

Daisy sighed. They were so close...

Sam and James Rhodes kept watch on the aliens from the air as they poured out of their ships.

"Sam, not trying to borrow trouble...but does that look like all of them?" Rhodey asked. "I thought there'd be more."

"Yeah." agreed Sam, scanning the barrier. The alien lady and her partner were still staring across the border as their new troops lined up behind them. Then he saw a third leader emerge, one handed.

"Rhodey, that one of the guys from New York?"

Rhodey focused, and nodded quickly.

"Yeah, lost an arm in the battle. The science geeks have it now."

Sam watched as a new force swarmed in behind him. Heading...away from the battle.

"Oh, no. Hell, no..." he swore as he realized their plan. He had seen that movement before, back in the Middle East.

"What...oh, Christ." agreed Rhodey. He peeled off to get a better look, as Sam activated his com unit.

"Cap," he warned, "if these things circle the perimeter and get in behind us...There's nothing between them and Vision."

Steve's head swiveled, following Falcon and War Machine's path. He frowned sharply, seeing the alien's intentions.

Steve shot a glance at T'Challa. The Wakandan nodded, coming to a similar conclusion. They shared a grim smile.

"Then we better keep 'em in front of us." Steve observed.

Okoye glared at the two men.

"How do we do that?" she asked T'Challa.

T'Challa looked back at his most trusted general.
"We open the barrier." he replied.

He put his hand to his ear, activating the Wakandan field communicators, and took a deep breath. They'd be risking it all to buy Shuri and the others more time. He hoped it would be enough.

"On my signal, open North-West Section Seventeen." he ordered.

"Requesting confirmation, My King. You said open the barrier?" came the disembodied voice.

Okoye snorted. After the battle, there would be reminders about not questioning direct orders from the King. They would be painful.

T'Challa gave a reflexive nod.

"On my signal."

Behind his, M'Baku leaned close to Okoye.

"This will be the end of Wakanda." he muttered, readying for the charge.

Okoye didn't even look at him.

"Then it will be the noblest ending in history." she responded.

T'Challa took several steps in front of his army.

"Wakanda Forever!" he cried, crossing his hands over his chest.

He felt Shuri's armor and helmet materialize, sliding over his face, briefly shielding it from the morning glare, blotting out the Wakandan battle cry arising around him. T'Challa took off towards the barrier at a full out run over the good Wakandan soil. He heard footsteps pounding just behind him and smiled. Steve Rogers was being his diplomatic self, giving the King of Wakanda precedence for the invaders. Further back, the roar of the Wakandans (and Avengers) thundered behind them.

He spared one final thought for his love, Nakia. How glad he was that she was on mission and not here. No matter what happened, she might survive this.

He probably wouldn't.

The barrier was just in front of them.

"Now!" he cried, and the the purple section dropped, allowing alien invaders access to Wakandan territory.

He took two, maybe three breaths, then the first was on him.

---

**Avengers Jet**

Lockjaw stiffened under Daisy's touch. He barked once, sharply, then turned his head towards the cockpit, as Clint gently brought the jet down on the ocean surface.
"WOOF!"

The bark was deeper, louder, and seemed to shake the jet.

"All right, I'm coming..." Clint snarked, grabbing his bow and quivers.

Impatiently, Lockjaw padded forward, and mouthed Clint's arm, teeth never touching it, pulling him towards the group.

"Hey...get off me..."

"Think he's ready to go, Barton." responded Melinda May, checking the last of her weaponry.

"Not a moment too soon." added Robbie, zipping up his body armour and nodding towards the windows. The waterlevel seemed to be rising.

"I think we may have misjudged the seaworthiness of this craft." agreed Valkryie, unsheathing her sword.

"Then let's do this." said Daisy, taking hold of Lockjaw's ruff. The rest of the team gathered round, touching the dog and holding onto each other. She took one moment to be amused that Lockjaw didn't want to let go of Clint, who was trying to remove his arm, with no success.

"I'm going to need that in a second, you stupid..."

"Lockjaw, take us to..."

There was a flash, and then the jet was empty.

Within minutes, it had sunk underneath the waves.

---

**CODA**

**Infinity Gauntlet**

Phil Coulson was dazed, as he stumbled back to his "room".

Somewhere Thanos had actively used most of the stones, he had been fighting somewhere. Phil had dodged, weaved between the light bursts coming from the stones. An instinct, which suspiciously sounded like a grumpy old man, told him he did not want to get hit by any of those beams. Then a green light joined the rest, and Phil knew what had happened.

Thanos had the Time Stone. Which probably meant that Stephen Strange was dead.

(Considering all the times Strange had insisted he should have died...hey, May had informed him...he felt that was rather ironic.)

He looked up at the orange bubble.

"How is anyone supposed to deal with THAT?" he asked, leaning against the wall.

"I don't know." came her response.
Phil lifted his head to see Gamora's figure come into view. She had appeared shortly after the old man had left him to figure things out. Apparently she was trapped, just like he was.

"But with less agency," she had informed him, unhappily.

"I think it has to do with intent."

"How did you come up with that?"

Gamora smirked.

"I had more time to watch while you were busy dodging..." 

Phil sighed. Gamora and Melinda would get along excellently. If they ever got out of here.

"I think..." she said slowly, "My father can control the rest of the stones. But you have control over the Soul Stone. It never activated for him."

"Maybe he didn't need it."

"He won't...until he has them all."

"So, what do you think I need to do, Gamora?"

"Simple."

She looked down at him.

"You have to do what no one else in the galaxy could. You have to tell my father 'No'. And make it stick."

Five years ago, Phil wouldn't have had any doubts. But since then...two (or more) deaths, his Framework mindwipe...his snivelling teacher...the Rider...hell, everything... Now wasn't really the time to lose self confidence, but...

"What if I can't? What if Thanos is stronger?" Phil asked quietly.

Gamora bowed her head, and a cold red mirror formed on his wall. Somehow, Gamora could bend the powers of the other stones, if not control them outright. As he watched, images from another reality flickered through.

"Steve?"

"Oh...man...

"Up General, up! This is no place to die..."

"We're cursed..."

"I am Groot..."
"God...have mercy..."

"Tony, there was no other way..."

"At least...together..."

"Motherfu..."

"Mommy...help..."

Phil watched aghast as his friends dropped to the ground, fading away into ashes and dust, as if they had never been. The last broke his heart, and he hid his head in his hands and wept.

Gamora watched him, tears running down her face.

"It has to be you, Coulson. If you can't..."

She gestured at the wall.

Phil paused, then pulled himself together. He turned away from the wall and strode over towards the bubble, his Agent persona taking over more and more as he got closer. The face he eventually turned to her was as bland as he had ever given to Tony Stark.

Time for some emotional muscle memory.

"All right, Gamora. Let's plan."

Chapter End Notes

May I just say that Framework Fitz really knows the most opportune time to show up? (Yep, that's the Doctor from Agents of SHIELD S5.) And those are the Doctor's views of the situation, neither mine (or Fitz's).

And Team Daisy (with a little assistance from a friendly Inhuman) are enroute. Come on, you don't think we would've come this far without Daisy and Clint (and the rest) kicking butt in the final battle?

The CODA - those are of course, some of the last words from SNAP victims in Infinity War. Added to that list were those from Simmons, Mack, Morse with Hunter, and lastly, Lila Barton (As a parent, my own version of hell includes those as last words of one of my children)

Next up...it's Earth's final stand.
Throw Down the Gauntlet

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and Wakandans make their stand.
And get some unexpected reinforcements...

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is going to be a little choppy...

Wakanda

The Avengers found themselves split up as soon as the battle started.

Steve Rogers and T'Challa fought grimly, back to back, acting as a breakwater against the hordes of aliens. But slowly, surely, they were pushed back from the barrier opening, and more simply swarmed around them.

Okoye, separated from the Wakandan leader, merely focused at the task at hand - killing enough of the strange beings before they brought her down. Looking beside her, she noted Natasha Romanoff swinging her staves and firing off her chargers, as brave as any of the Dora Milije.

Nat took a second and grinned at Okoye.

"I think we pissed them off!" she called over, taking down the alien in front of her.

Okoye nodded back.

If she had to die today, she thought, this was not bad company to do it in.

Then the next wave was on them, and her world narrowed to the teeth and claws before her.

Above the field, Sam Wilson laid down another line of fire. It was slowing them down, he thought, but not enough. He looked to the east. War Machine was dropping missiles across their flank, trying to slow down the invaders, keep them penned on the plains until Shuri and Wanda were done with Vision.

An electric bolt hit him, and his wings froze. The ground rushed up to meet him, and Sam struggled to slow himself down. Luckily, he hadn't been too high up when they caught him...but it still was gonna hurt...

"Oooph!" he grunted, plowing into the soil.
"Sam!" cried Rhodey.

"I'm all right..." he made out. "Just need a second to come back online..."

"You don't have a second," called out Bucky Barnes. "Get OUT of there..."

And then the things were on him, climbing over his armour, hacking at the wings. He struggled, knowing he only had a few moments, at best.

A muffled roar, and he was suddenly free, looking up into the very welcome face of M'Baku. The Jubari scowled down at him, and muttered something before standing guard over the flyer.

Bucky snickered through the com.

"What did he say?" Sam demanded.

"That the amount of meat you eat makes you a perfect target." Bucky informed him.

Sam scowled back, and tried to come back online before the next wave overran them.

Bucky turned his attention away from the pair and scanned the field. Nat had disappeared with the Wakandan general, and Sam was safe for the moment. But more and more of them were pouring through the barrier. He snarled in frustration. Steve was in the thick of things, as usual, and there was no way he was going to make it to his side in time.

He picked off another couple sneaking up on Steve's six.

"I would've had them, mother." came the welcome snark.

"We have a lot to catch up on, punk." he returned. "And you're not checking out on me before I hear all about Sharon..."

"Jerk."

"Did she evacuate with the Council?"

"Yeah, we needed her liaising with Piper, in case this all goes south."

"Would you two stop gossiping and get your mind back to it?" snarked Natasha.

"Yes, Ma'am." Bucky replied, and put the rifle back to his shoulder.

His ammo was depleting faster than he wanted to admit.

In his section, Bruce had been having fun...well, as much fun as you can have on the battlefield, stomping on the aliens like the cockroaches they were. The only thing was that now they had identified him as a target. Which meant they were now all rushing him, trying to knock him over.

His foot hit a rock, and he flailed helplessly, tumbling onto his back.
"Hulk...buddy...now would be good..."

No response from the usual rumble in the back of his mind. A flicker caught his attention, just inside the barrier.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like he was going to survive long enough to see what it was, as the aliens began to chip away at his visor.

He was probably hallucinating from the Wakandan heat and sun. Because that looked like...a dog?

At the edge of the battle, Daisy Johnson surveyed the scene with horror. Beside her, Lockjaw whined sharply.

"Where do we start?" she muttered, dismayed.

Beside her, Valkyrie narrowed her eyes.

"You and I, Quake. We must to the battlefield, now. Clint..."

They looked to where he was a heartbeat ago, but he was already gone. Daisy mentally wished him luck.

"No time to worry." Valkyrie continued. "May, you and friend Reyes must find your scientist friends. In the city yonder."

Daisy looked at Melinda May. She shrugged back.

"As good a plan as any, I guess."

Robbie nodded brusquely, and pulled out his gun.

Valkyrie knelt and looked Lockjaw in the eyes.

"Brave hound, I thank thee for thy service. Now, speed thee hence to thy owners, and see if thee can convince them for more relief."

Lockjaw looked up at Daisy, his head questioning.

"Go back to the other Inhumans, get help." Daisy translated.

Lockjaw nuzzled Daisy's hand, and vanished.

Valkyrie turned and headed towards the knot at the barrier opening, her sword at the ready.

Daisy stepped to May and hugged her tightly. May returned the hug.

"Be careful, Daisy."

"You too...May." Daisy hesitated. "Don’t...die on me, Agent May."

May lifted an eyebrow.
"Do I look like Agent Morse, Johnson..."

Daisy smiled, then turned to Robbie.

"Watch your back, Reyes. And hers."

Robbie gave her a quick salute.

"You know it."

He looked over her shoulder.

"You know, you might want to go help that red and gold turtle? He looks important."

"On it."

Daisy stretched her hands out, and her force quake propelled her across the plains. May and Robbie watched her go, as her first blows landed in the swarm over the suit.

"Let's go."

As one the two turned and ran along the treeline, heading back into the city.

"Do you know the other Agents are?"

"We'll figure it out."

"Of course we will."

May glared at him.

"Try to keep up..."

"Yes, ma'am..."

Rhodey narrowed his eyes at the two heading into the trees.

"Newcomers on the field..." he reported.

T'Challa paused, as he watched the young woman in armour stride towards them, her sword snapping out, clearing a path to the two of them.

"Captain Rogers?" she asked coolly, pulling her blade free. "Friend Barton described you well."

"Barton? I'm not sure I want to know how..." Steve responded.

She smiled.

"He said, look to the place where the fighting is the fiercest and you'll find him. I am Valkyrie, a friend of Thor and your Banner..."
"VAL??" came Bruce's voice over the coms. "Do you know where Thor is?"

She shook her head.

"Nay, I have not seen him since he fled with your Coulson to Earth. I am sorry for your loss, Captain. I and mine are here now."

"Yeah," came Bruce's voice over the coms. "I have Agent Johnson here."

Steve looked over and saw his friend being helped to his feet by Daisy. She stretched her hand out, and other group was flung back, squashing against the ground. She winced, looked down at her arms, but said nothing.

"Bruce...ask her what's wrong..."

A moment later, Daisy shook her head.

_FINE_, Steve thought, they'd figure it out later.

He brought his attention back, and saw Valkyrie glaring at the tall alien woman. She smirked in return, and clenched her hand around her blue throat.

Valkyrie growled.

"Proxima is mine."

"If we can." agreed T'Challa. "They advance again."

The three took up their stance, and devoted themselves to ridding themselves of the threat. Shockwaves erupted to Steve's side.

"Bruce, how far can Daisy push these guys back?"

There was a pause, then Bruce's voice came back over the line.

"Steve...not a word, Daisy...Daisy's gauntlets have a crack in them. If they completely break..."

Bruce sighed.

"Without them, her quakes affect the rest of her body. She'll literally shake herself apart if she goes too far."

"I can do this, Captain," replied Daisy. "I know what's at stake."

Damn it, Steve thought.

"OK, keep doing what you're doing. Let me know if the situation changes."

Behind him was an explosion.

"Annddd...we have Barton." came Natasha's resigned tones over the coms. Steve knew that was her equivalent of a cheer.
"You know you love me!" was the muted response.

"Clint just took out the section around Tasha and Okoye." reported Rhodey. "Nice to see you, Clint...get tired of vacation?"

"Nah, I told Nat not to have any fun without me, but she never listens." quipped Clint back, his voice stronger now. "Your 9 o clock, Barnes!"

"Got it."

"Just where did you get a com, Agent Barton?" inquired T'Challa, thrusting his claws into yet another alien.

"Classified, your Majesty."

T'Challa heard the indignant snort from his General and chuckled. She and Clint would be having words when this was done, he had no doubt.

Maybe they would make it to the other side of the battle, after all.

Some time later, Clint peered over the side of the opening they had jumped into for cover.

"Another group, couple of minutes out. Looks like Daisy's pushing them back, but she can't keep them back much longer."

He sunk back beside Nat, sipping from his water bottle.

"Didn't we say we were never going to do this again?" he asked her, running his hand over his face.

"No, Coulson said he was going to keep us from missions like this." Nat responded. "But then again, he also told us that we were banned from Eastern Europe so..."

"Hey, any Coulson edicts are no longer valid after he dies." Clint came back, checking his quiver. "He has to stop dying, then I'll start listening to him again."

"Fair point." agreed Natasha.

"So...worse than Budapest?" Clint asked her.

"Way worse than Budapest."

Okoye looked up and over.

"Again."

She stood and braced herself.

Nat and Clint flanked her, readying for the next wave.
To his left, another group of aliens were blown to pieces.

They were being worn down by sheer numbers, Bucky thought, readjusting his ammo supply. Clint and his friends had brought some welcome space, but it had been filled again. They had bought maybe an extra hour, two at tops, for Shuri to save them all.

He saw Steve drop to one knee at the front, shielding his head. To his left, M'Baku and Sam were regrouping their forces, but the numbers were dwindling. To the other side, Nat, Clint, Okoye were holding their own, but more were now targeting them and Bruce, and Agent Johnson's bursts were becoming shorter and shorter.

Bucky was choosing where to make his final stand, and was moving up to bail out Steve one more (last) time, when a crunching sound came from the side. He looked over. The aliens had toppled Bruce again, and Johnson had been caught underneath him. The aliens swarmed them both, and he quickly altered to change directions when...

**WHHHOOMMM!**

The lightening streak blinded him, and the resulting shock wave from the thunder threw him off his feet. Blinking furiously, he saw the aliens fall, electrocuted throughout the plain.

"**YEESSS!!!**" cheered Bruce through the com mic. "Hah! Hah! Hah! You guys are so screwed now!"

*A storm? thought Bucky. As his vision cleared, he saw three newcomers. A man with an axe, a...raccoon...and a...tree?

*Oh God, he must be losing his mind...maybe he had been hit?*

He got to his feet when he saw the man turn to face the aliens.

"**BRING ME THANOS!!**" he screamed, as the winds whipped around him, and he leaped towards the barrier opening, the raccoon and tree pelting after them.

*When did this become a Disney movie?* Bucky thought, following the trio.

Rocket Raccoon stood, firing as the aliens approached.

"Come get some, Space Dogs..." he screamed, as he covered Groot and Thor's approach to the front. "Yeah...come get some!!"

Bucky sighed. The rodent meant well, but wasn't all that effective from that level. He scooped him up by his collar, and fired with his other hand, turning in a circle. The raccoon got the idea, and kept firing, yelling at his enemies until they had cleared the section.

As Bucky dropped him, the raccoon turned and eyed him.

"How much for the gun?" it rasped.

Bucky rolled his eyes.

"Not for sale."
As the beast took him in further, his eyes lit on his arm, and an evil grin spread over his face.

"Okay...How much for the arm?" he asked.

_The arm?_ Bucky thought. _What the hell..._

As he moved off towards Steve and the tree, he heard a low voice behind him chuckle.

"Oh...I'll get that arm..."

In front of them, Thor took his position on the battlefield beside his Midgardian leader. Then he blinked.

"Valkyrie...you survived?"

She swung through the next group of aliens.

"Thanos intended me to bear witness for him. I am glad I found you, my liege." She jerked her sword free, and nodded to him.

"I found Loki." he said.

A look of sorrow briefly flashed over her face.

"I was unable to stop Thanos. I am sorry."

She bowed her head.

"He died honorably, my lord...claiming the name Odinson."

Thor blinked back the tears, then he hardened, nodding at her. Turning, he looked at Steve. The man looked tireder, older than when Thor last walked Midgard. But from the tales the Son of Coul had told about his friends in the last several years, that was to be expected. He wished he had been there to smash some heads together before the schism came to pass.

"New haircut?" Steve quipped.

"Notice you've copied my beard." Thor responded.

He looked over. Groot had snaked his arm out, impaling his enemies, the racoon coming up quickly behind him.

"By the way, this is a friend of mine, Tree."

"I am Groot!" Groot snarked.

Steve paused, and put his hand on his chest. Just like in those movies Tony had insisted on showing him.

"I am Steve Rogers," he offered politely.
Thor grinned. There'd be plenty of time to tell him what Groot had really said, later.

And he needed to have a word with the raccoon about his charge's language.

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**Wakandan Science Centre**

"Fitz?" Wanda asked urgently. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, do tell her, dear boy." the Doctor sneered. "The world is going to hell, and you're going crackers."

Leo Fitz sank to his knees, his head in his hands.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

"Why don't you just give in and let me take over?" the Doctor asked. "You know it's the only way us and Simmons will make it out of here alive."

Wanda knelt down beside him.

"Fitz...please...we need your help." she said quietly. "I can't help you unless you tell..."

"He's in my HEAD!" blurted out Fitz. "The Doctor...the Framework vision of me. I did such awful things, I killed Mace...and he won't leave me be..."

Wanda shot a look over at Simmons. Shuri's fingers kept flying over the computer terminal.

"This Framework...the VR where HYDRA won?"

Simmons nodded unhappily.

"He was one of the chief rulers in that world." she confirmed. "Evil, amoral, utterly ruthless. He experimented on Inhumans, torturing them, collecting their powers for AIDA."

Simmons swallowed.

"The problem is is that they all lived their lives, made their choices when their one regret was taken from him. For Fitz...he got a relationship with his father."

"More of you with daddy issues?" said Shuri under her breath, never stopping.

"So...multiple personalities?" asked Wanda.

Simmons shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know enough to diagnose. I think that's the best way to describe it...that life was as real to them as this one." agreed Simmons. "We never had the time to recover, to reconcile any of this before we were taken and thrown into the Hole."

Wanda nodded, and turned her attention back to Fitz.
"Fitz...listen to me. I can push him back for a while, until this is all over."

Fitz shuddered on the lab floor, his eyes shut. He could feel the Doctor standing over him.

"Lies...you'll never be free of me, lad. I AM you."

"Yeah, you are." Fitz responded. "But...maybe...if there is a way...I don't have to be you."

"How dare you!" the Doctor roared.

Fitz opened his eyes and looked at Wanda.

"Please...just until this is over. I need to be able to help."

Wanda smiled.

"All right."

She brushed her hand against Leo's forehead.

"NO..."

The Doctor vanished from Fitz's sight.

"Thank you..."

Wanda sighed, settling back on her heels.

"This is only temporary, Agent Fitz. You're going to need to find a way to deal with this on your own."

"No...you have me, Fitz." said Simmons, watching them intently.

The communication unit crackled.

"Shuri?" T'Challa asked. "How much longer?"

Shuri frowned.

"We've barely begun, brother."

She didn't need to tell him about the Agent, she thought. No reason for him to worry.

"You might want to to pick up the pace." he ordered, and the line went dead.

"He doesn't ask much." snorted Simmons.

"It's only the world at stake." observed Vision from the table.

"Been there, done that." noted Fitz, taking his place.

Shuri gave a sharp nod.
"Then let's keep going."

**Wakandan Battlefield**

When fighting against an endless sea of aliens, Steve thought, it helped to have a vengeful god on your team.

The additions of Thor and his friends seemed to be turning the tide for them.

He should have known better.

Without a warning, gigantic spiked wheels erupted from the ground, and rolled over the forces in front of them.

Aghast, T'Challa activated the open com line.

"Fall back!" he ordered. "Everyone fall back now!"

From her spot on the science window, Wanda watched as the spiked wheels tore up the ground easily, Avenger and Wakandan alike darting out of their way. The wheels responded, changing their strategy, separating, becoming more nimble and speeding up. She watched as two of them were pushed together by an invisible force, careening into a third. Across the field, smaller explosions knocked several of them on their sides, but not destroying them.

"I'm...not sure...how much longer I can do this, guys." came Daisy's voice, heavy with pain, over the coms.

"Running out of explosive tips, Cap..." reported Barton.

Wanda tallied the leftover threshers and remaining aliens in her mind. She could see the two leaders far off in the distance.

She glanced at Vision, still on the table, surrounded by the three scientists. Their computer screens showed how far they were into the process.

The bar was distressingly low.

She needed to decide, and quickly.

Above the battle, Rhodey swore as his missiles exploded against the vehicles, raining shrapnel down on the invaders. But not damaging the spikes.

"Focus that fire on the left flank, Sam." he suggested.

"I'm doing it." Sam snarled back. His weaponry had the same effect as War Machine's. None at all.

Below them, Clint, Nat and Okoye made one last leap out of the path of the incoming shredder, only to find themselves in the path of another.

"Shit..." swore Clint.
"I'm so sorry, Laura, he thought, as he braced for the inevitable. *Watch over our kids...*

A soft thump landed in front of him, and he looked at a long mane of red hair.

Wanda lifted her hands, glowing red, crackling dangerously. The scarlet glow formed around the spiked wheel, lifting it into the air, and landing straight into the alien mob. The resulting explosion rocked the area.

Wanda let a long breath out, as her three friends stood. Clint clapped her on her shoulder, and Nat favoured her with her "well-done" smile.

Okoye glanced at the three Avengers, lifting an eyebrow.

"Why was she up there all this time?" she asked indignantly.

At the barrier, Proxima Midnight gave her partner a glance.

He nodded.

As the two Black Order members strode across the barrier into Wakanda, she lifted her wrist to her mouth.

"She's on the field." she observed, her eyes narrowing.

"Take it."

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**CODA**

**Hell's Kitchen**

Maria Hill swore as she dodged the hail of bullets.

"You just *had* to leave it here, didn't you?" she spat at Nick Fury, who shrugged.

"I never expected SHIELD to fall," he observed, picking off two of their attackers. "And I've been a little too busy to pick it up since."

She took out several more.

"You know, you think you're so cute with these secret caches." Hill growled. "In the Canadian SHIELD...underneath Carter's favorite bar..."

"That one wasn't me."

"And now where it all began."

Fury took out the final attacker.

"Where better?" he asked, quickly running across the room. "How was I supposed to know the
Kingpin had been using this as a hideout?"

"I can't believe you sometimes..."

Hill's phone vibrated. She looked down, and lifted an eyebrow as she pressed Accept.

"It's Piper. It's begun."

"How does it look Agent?"

There was a pause, and a ragged breath came over the line.

"That bad?" Hill asked, shocked.

She looked up. Fury had stepped over a body, and laid his palm against the wall. The wall glowed briefly, then faded, a doorway appearing in front of him.

"We need to speed this up." Hill noted, moving to join him.

She'll never get here in time, she thought. But she'll be able to avenge us...

“I'm declaring a Code Red."

Chapter End Notes

Ooh...

So, sorry, I fully intended to get to Thanos this chapter, but, as you all know, a lot happens in the Battle of Wakanda. Even more when you throw our Agents (and Clint, and Valkyrie) into the mix. Hopefully not too much whiplash?

A word about Agent Fitz. I love Agents of SHIELD, but they don't handle mental health issues all that well. In this case, S5's Doctor's storyline. I'm not even remotely qualified to write about what Fitz came out of the Framework with, and I hesitate to join the trend of villains being mentally ill. Hence the quick patch-up by Wanda, but Fitz (and Simmons) will probably need to find some mental health professionals to deal with the long term effects. If, of course, they make it out of Wakanda...

(I think all MCU heroes could benefit from talking to someone at this point. Dr. Garner, how we miss you.)

And a word about Quake. I remember the conversations when IW came out that Daisy could've solved the Thanos issue all by herself. But a lot of people forgot about the price Daisy pays for her ForceQuakes (look at S2 and the beginnings of S4), and if Jemma's Gauntlets fail her...well...there is only so much those gauntlets can take...GULP.

Next chapter - the Black Order takes the field. Our heroes still have some tricks up their body armour. Will it be enough?
Chapter Summary

The Battle of Wakanda continues...

Chapter Notes

Sorry, still gonna be a bit choppy...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wakandan Science Centre

When the blow fell, it fell quickly.

One moment, Shuri, Fitz and Simmons were desperately coding and sorting the linkages in Vision's Mind Stone. Wanda's abrupt departure had given notice that things were not going well for the Avengers on the field. The next, the lab was being invaded by one of the aliens who had attacked Tony Stark in New York.

The Dora Milije assigned to guard them lept to their defence. The alien snarled as his weapons met their advanced spears.

"We've run out of time," yelled Shuri. "Disconnect him, quickly!"

As Jemma took over, backing up their work, Fitz and Shuri started the process. Vision moaned as the tendrils disconnected themselves from his mind, one by one.

"Can this thing move any faster?" sniped Fitz.

"Not without internal damage to him." replied Shuri, her nimble fingers flying.

She looked up to see the last Dora fall.

"Finish it!" she ordered.

Simmons moved to take her place, and Shuri picked up her sonic paw. Facing the intruder, she fired off several shots, forcing it backwards.

"Done." Simmons gasped behind her.

The two agents pulled their weapons, and flanked Shuri, standing between the alien and the lab bench.

"Get out of here, Vision!" Fitz barked, firing several shots.
The alien whirled his weapon, blocking sonic blasts and bullets alike. Then he pointed it at the three scientists, and a whirlwind seemed to erupt, a pent up force blasting them over the balcony railing, and onto the main lab floor.

As the three lay, stunned from the impact, they heard a chilling voice from above.

"They don't escape."

"Fitz! Simmons! Do you COPY?" barked Agent Melinda May into her com.

The Wakandan city was deserted, which, on the one hand was great, because it meant all the non-combatants were safely out of harms way.

On the other hand, there was no one left to give directions.

Leaning in the shade of the building, Robbie Reyes shielded his eyes against the Wakandan glare. Then he gasped, catching May's attention. Pointing upwards, the two saw Wanda launch herself from a window and soar across the city.

"Want to bet she was guarding the robot?" he asked.

"They would have left Fitz and Simmons to help with Vision." May ground out. "But most of the firepower is out there on the field. I don't like this."

May turned her gaze back to the opening in the stone face.

"At least we know where they are now." she finished.

"We think."

May glared at Robbie.

"You got a better idea?" she snapped.

He shrugged.

"Not really."

"Then let's move!"

The two took off at a blistering pace towards the building.

Corvus Glaive turned from the balcony. His Outriders had infiltrated the floors beneath him. Even with their...primitive...weapons, the humans should be no match for them.

He put them out of his mind, and turned to the table where the Mind Stone lay. It was empty. He cocked his head, studying the scene.

*Interesting...*
A wisp of air was the only warning Glaive had.

He turned to meet an enraged Vision charging at him. Hitting him high, the two flew over the scientists' shoulders and plummeted out of sight.

Shuri staggered upright, catching herself against the research table.

Fitz crawled over to a groaning Simmons, a cut above her eye bleeding freely. Tearing a strip off his shirt, he bandaged the cut, looking her over closely.

"I'm all right, Fitz." she muttered, holding the cloth in place.

He rolled his eyes and turned to Shuri. She nodded, then slumped into the chair, gazing off into space.

"We failed." she observed despondently.

Simmons got to her feet, and lurched over to place a hand on her shoulder.

"It was an impossible job," she consoled her. "There was just too many synapses. No one...or three...could have done that in time."

Fitz hung his head as he got to his feet. It was just one step closer to the end of the world.

*Scratch...scratch...scratch...*

The humans eyes narrowed.

"Do you have another one of those paw things?" Fitz asked quietly.

"One." she replied equally quiet.

Fitz edged back towards the table, as Shuri slid the weapon over to him. She pushed Simmons into the vacated chair and took a defensive stance beside Fitz.

"Knife. Left drawer." she muttered.

Shuri barely heard Simmons rummage through her desk. Her training narrowed her focus down to what was important.

*Scratch...scratch...scratch...*

Then the door flew open, and things from her nightmares burst through, claws extended, bladed weapons at the ready.

As one, Shuri and Fitz began to fire.

May charged up the steps inside the building Wanda had vacated.

"May...Vision is out...he's on the field." Robbie reported, right on her heels. "He and one of those aliens just took a header out of that window."

"This situation just keeps getting better!" she snapped, continuing to climb.
"I'd hate to see what could make it any worse." he responded.

Shots echoed throughout the building. May turned and glared at Robbie.

"You just had to say that, didn't you?" she groaned.

Robbie shrugged in apology.

"At least we know where they are now..." he observed.

May took off towards the sounds of the fighting.

As Robbie turned the corner, he found the hallway filled with the aliens from the plains. Melinda observed them with a cold stare.

"Err..you're welcome?" Robbie offered.

May rolled her eyes.

"Try not to get in my way, Reyes." she said as she charged at them.

"Yes, Ma'am." he responded, picking off the first couple, and snagging their blade.

*Much better*, he thought, before the horde descended on them.

Soaring above the field, Sam Wilson kept a close eye on Wanda. He was grateful she made it to Clint and Nat in time, and she was wreaking havoc on the intruders. But that meant there was no one with Vision. He sighed, and turned back towards the centre. Which, of course, was when that bloody android blasted right out of it, Black Order grunt under his hands.

As Vision disappeared into the foliage, Sam quickly thumbed his com, swooping low in Vision's direction.

"Guys," he yelled, "we got a Vision situation here."

It had been a long day, or maybe the aliens had a better read on Sam's position. As Sam approached where Vision had fallen, two of them leapt, seemingly out of nowhere, and attached themselves to his wings.

"Goddamn it, not AGAIN!" he swore, as they pulled him towards the ground.

"I've got you, Sam!" yelled War Machine, veering to take out the alien cluster.

"Someone get to Vision!" ordered Steve Rogers, shaking off the aliens desperately swarming him, T'Challa and Valkyrie.

T'Challa felt his heart plummet. If Vision was on the field...where was his sister? He tapped his comlink.

"Shuri?"

No response.

"Shuri...answer me!"

Silence.
He snarled as several of the aliens tried to take advantage of his inattention. As their bodies joined their compatriots, he watched as Doctor Banner turned his robot body towards the centre.

"I got him!" Bruce yelled, activating his thrusters, and headed towards the bottom of the mountain.

"I'll cover you!" responded Daisy, picking off the aliens on the field. She winced as a particularly stubborn alien took a little more of her quakeforce than she had been expending. She looked down at her gauntlet. The crack had steadily grown wider over the course of the battle.

"Agent Johnson," T'Challa called over the coms. "I would consider it a great favour if you would return to the centre and check on the scientists there."

Daisy nodded.

"Copy that, your Majesty." she returned, and pushed herself off and over towards the shattered window in the distance.

She let out a quiet groan. This was going to hurt...

Elsewhere on the field, Wanda's head snapped up at Steve's order.

_Damn it Vision... _she thought. _There's no way the scientists were done. Why did you leave? _

Her heart grew cold as she considered the reasons why her lover would have had to flee the sanctuary of the lab.

"On my way!" she called out.

As she lurched to her feet, something hard hit her from the side, sending her sprawling into the trench. Dazed, she turned over to see the female alien smirk down at her. A glimpse of the UK cobblestones filled her vision for a moment, and she scrabbled back as the woman advanced, sword point almost at her throat.

"He'll die alone," Proxima Midnight sneered. "As will you."

As Wanda braced for the impact, a calm voice cut through the battle din.

"She's not alone." Natasha Romanoff declared, battle staves at the ready.

Proxima turned her head. Okoye snarled at her, her spear pointed at her. She nodded to Natasha minutely.

_This was a challenge? _Proxima thought. _She kept at Natasha, stabbing at her with the sword. Natasha quickly turned her staves into a spear, deflecting the blow with an electrical crackle. She kicked at Proxima, as Okoye quickly moved towards the front to support her._

_Maybe it would be...for a couple of minutes. _Proxima thought, returning the strikes.

Wanda felt a hand slide underneath her arm, dragging her away from the conflict. She staggered upwards, as arrows took out the other aliens surrounding them.

"Come on, kid," called Clint Barton, sighting down another alien. "Pull yourself together, get your head back in the game."

As Wanda tried to catch her breath and concentrate, Clint looked down at her worriedly.
"I can't shoot big blue over there, Nat'd kill me. Vision needs you, we need you...come ON Wanda..."

Just a few...moments...

Vision allowed his opponent to take most of the force from the landing at the foot of the centre. Still, his optic sensors went dark for a moment, and he stumbled, recalibrating as quickly as he could.

Corvus Glaive sneered. The being was still weak from whatever they had been doing to him. As he kicked Vision in the back, knocking him down again, he briefly regretting ordering the extermination of the other humans. They certainly had made this easier for him.

As Vision lurched to his feet, a hammer hit him from the side, knocking him even further away.

"Aren't you required somewhere else?" he heard the first ask.

"Making sure you don't botch the mission, brother." the second responded, picking up his hammer. "Like you did last time."

"And you did so well yourself...brother..." the other snarked back.

Vision groaned. He was going to die at the hands of bickering children. Although, considering his time with the Avengers, it almost seemed appropriate.

At least he would go out on his feet, he thought, standing up one more time, and bracing himself for the impact.

A whooshing sound came from overheard. Vision smiled. There were few that could make that noise.

The Hulkbuster suit, dented, its red and gold paint job scratched and dirty, torn and dusty landed between the combatants. It took a defensive stance, one hand pointing at each of the Black Order members.

Glave and Cull Obsidian looked at each other in disbelief.

Really? This was the best Earth could do?

"Ohh no, oh no you don't." Bruce snarled. "This isn't going to be like New York, pal. This suit's already kicked the crap out of the Hulk..."

Cull sighed. They were wasting time. He jumped forward, and grabbed the red and gold arm for leverage. Surprisingly, the arm snapped up, and grabbed for the hammer. The suit jets fired, pulling them away from the battle, away from the Mind Stone, and landing in front of a cascade of water.

Cull snarled. He was going to take this human apart slowly for keeping him from the Mind Stone.

"Guys!" Bruce called. "Vision needs backup now!"

The human should worry more about himself, Cull thought, bringing his hammer down for the first chop.

Fitz paused for breath.
"How many charges does this thing have left?" he asked Shuri, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

"Not enough." she admitted. They had taken down countless aliens, and yet they were no better off than they were in the first wave.

Fitz glanced back at Jemma. She had taken the worst of the fall, and the rag over her eye was clotting the worst of it, but she was in no shape to make a run for it.

He spotted the discarded weaponry on the floor and swallowed hard. His time at Hydra Academy in the Framework had improved several skills. Knife fighting was one of them.

He quickly turned and kissed Jemma.

"I love you." he said quietly.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Fitz...don't..."

He turned to Shuri.

"I can clear more of them off the floor, buy us some more time for the others to get here."

He passed her the other sonic paw, and closed his eyes. When they reopened, there was a determined focus to them.

"Just don't hit me?" he requested, as he approached the aliens, and scooped up two of the blades.

"Come on, then..." he snarled at them, slashing his way through the first group.

Shuri rolled her eyes and glanced at Jemma, who had made her way to her side.

"Can I wing him a little?" she asked.

Jemma shook her head as she picked up the other paw.

"The only one who gets to shoot him is me." she responded, adjusting her bandage.

Shuri nodded.

"I've had boyfriends like that too..." she agreed, snapping off a shot over Fitz's shoulder.

"I...heard...that..."

In the corridor outside, May and Robbie steadily winnowed down the field in front of them. The shots from down the hallway had grown few and far between.

"Hurry," May gasped, ramming her knife into the gut of her current opponent. "They're running out of ammo, whereever they are. They're trying to conserve it now."

Robbie neatly sliced through his alien.

"What do you think?" he asked "10? 20 left?"

She glanced at him.

"Optimistic, aren't you?"
"It's either that or lay down and die..." he responded.

May nodded again, and they tackled their next group that stood between them and their friends.

Cull spat the water out of his mouth. Roaring, he grabbed at the armour encasing the human, kicking it in the small of the back, sending it crashing into the ground in front of him.

If he hurried, he could make it back before Glaive finished off the robot.

Bruce caught his breath, watching as the readouts fizzled and faded around him. He desperately felt for the rumble in the back of his mind. But, like it had been in New York, nothing answered him.

"Hulk." he called desperately. "Hulk, I know you like making your entrance at the last second, well, this is it, man. This is the last, last second."

As Bruce extended his left hand to protect himself, Cull grabbed it, and chopped at the shoulder joint with his axe. The electrical shock shook the armor, and Bruce gasped with the weight of it.

He screamed when the alien snapped it off, discarding it into the pool beside them.

"Ahhhhh! Hulk! Hulk! Hulk!"

Cull grinned, advancing for the final blow.

"Hulk..." Bruce whispered. "Please...we have to do this...together..."

Bruce closed his eyes and reached one last time.

Cull lifted his axe...and the armour exploded, catching him in the face, knocking him to his back.

He looked up and saw that the small human had been replaced.

By a giant green being.

"Together." Hulk rumbled, grabbing the alien by his leg and tossing him into the trees.

Hulk smiled and followed.

It was finally time to SMASH!

On the field, Proxima was annoyed.

These two gnats of human females were keeping her from destroying the only power that could stand between Thanos and the Mind Stone.

Natasha caught her breath as the next blow directed at Okoye. She stabbed at her enemy with her electric staff. It didn't even seem to affect her.

Okoye snarled as she ducked under the alien's sword. The...thing...was keeping them both off balance, not letting either of them get in a good shot.

"DUCK!"

Clint's call came just seconds before the metallic whine tore through the air. All three instinctively
obeyed as one of the ThresHERs soared over their heads. Okoye kept her eyes open, watching as the long blades tore into the Wakandan soil, passing mere inches from her head.

She hoped Clint and Wanda had escaped its path.

The minor pause allowed Proxima to regain her footing. *It was time to end this,* she thought.

Her long leg flexed, and connected with Natasha's jaw, sending her hard into the trench's side. In the next breath, she grabbed Okoye by her arm and her spear, and sent her flying away down the trench. Proxima spent a half second to ensure the second woman was far enough away to not get back in time, then turned her attention back to the first.

Natasha, gasping for breath, saw the sword come down towards her head. She quickly split her staff back into the staves, and desperately parried the blue woman's blows. One parry clashed with her wrist, and the sword spun out of her hands, just out of reach.

Proxima never hesitated. She grabbed Natasha by the front of her armour, and viciously hit her across the face, sending her spinning back down against the trench. She quickly pinned the smaller human down, and yanked out her arm blade, stabbing it downwards.

From his spot on the trench, Clint looked over to see his partner blocking the dagger with crossed staves.

"Oh, shit..." he swore, watching the deadly blade inch closer towards her neck.

He swung the bow around, and took aim at the alien's back.

"No...I have this one."

Wanda flexed her hands, and crimson energy spilled from her palms. It shot out, engulfing the alien. With a flick of her wrist, Wanda sent her screaming into the path of an oncoming Thresher. Both she and Clint reflexively closed their eyes as the machine tore her apart, dark blue blood spattering the two women below.

The two jumped into the trench, as Okoye approached, wiping the blue goo from her face.

Natasha looked up.

"That was really gross." she observed wrily.

Clint couldn't keep back his snickers.

Wanda spread her hands again, gently lifting them all to the lip of the trench.

"Where to now, ladies?" asked Clint.

Before any of them could answer, a familiar roar was heard from the edge of the battlefield.

Natasha looked at Clint.

"You think..." she started, but was interrupted by the body of the other alien from New York, battered and broken, flying onto the field.
The remaining alien army stopped, their heads swiveling, tracking their leader, as he staggered to his feet.

Out of the trees charged the Hulk, anger flashing in his eyes as he bore down on Cull.

Cull yanked a blaster from his side, quickly aiming it towards the charging beast.

This would slow him down, he thought, as his fingers tightened over the trigger.

Suddenly, he gasped at the sharp pain through his hand...a stick with a point? He turned.

Clint's second shot was true, directly through the alien's eye. He collapsed on the field without a sound.

Hulk came to stop, cautiously inspecting the fallen being.

"Hey big guy!" called Clint happily, trotting over. "It's been awhile!"

A grin spread over the Hulk face, and he swept Clint up in a hug.

Natasha gave a small smile to Wanda.

"I think it's time you go find Vision." she advised.

Wanda nodded and lifted off, scanning the field.

The robot was well maintained, Glaive thought, trading blows with the being. But it was time to put an end to this. Especially before Cull came back.

Glaive took advantage of a brief opening in Vision's defenses, darting in and grabbing his shoulder. Before Vision could do more than blink, the alien stabbed downwards, plunging his blade into his chest.

He leaned into the blade, as the robot groaned.

"I thought you were formidable, machine." he taunted. "But you're dying, like any man."

As he yanked his blade out, the robot fell at his feet. Smiling in triumph, he reached down to pluck the Mind Stone from its head.

With no warning, he was tackled by another human, sending him sprawling in the distance.

Glaive growled. *He was so close...*

Steve Rogers aimed for his enemy’s head, pounding away with all the strength he still had after the days’ battle.

*If only they had gotten there quicker in Scotland...so many 'if onlys'...* he thought.

"Get outta here!" Steve yelled at Vision.
He quickly blocked the staff coming down on his head with his arm shields, returning blows as quickly as they came. He glanced back at Vision, climbing heavily off his knees, disoriented, his head hanging down.

"GO!" he ordered.

Shuri swore under her breath. Fitz was good with a blade. She was better. He should have said something, instead of charging off like that.

She glanced over at Simmons.

"I think I'm almost out." Jemma confessed.

Shuri nodded.

"Me too."

They looked up to see Fitz lose his blade to the alien he had been fighting.

"NO!" screamed Jemma, as Fitz grappled with the claw.

Shuri shoved the other paw at her.

"Keep shooting!" she ordered, as she ran to Fitz's side, picking up the discarded blade, and slashing the other aliens back.

She spared a glance for Fitz. He slumped back against the wall, hands pressed to his stomach. An alarming amount of red stained the cloth around it.

"Sorry..." he gasped, sliding down into a sitting position.

Jemma ran to their side, firing her last shots, sliding in behind Shuri, and looking at the deep wound.

Fitz lifted his hand to her cheek.

"Tis but a scratch, woman..." he muttered, stroking it.

Shuri looked at the aliens creeping closer, cautiously surveying this new threat. Shuri knew it was now only a matter of time. She readied her stance in front of the Agents.

"Wakanda Forever!" she cried, bracing herself for the charge.

"Hold on to something!" came a new voice.

Instinctively she crouched with Simmons, sheltering Fitz, grabbing onto the wall.

An immense force passed by them, shaking the entire room, throwing the remaining aliens against the wall, bursting against the pressure. It finally stopped, and a light thump was heard behind them. Shuri whirled to her feet, defending against this new intruder.

Daisy leaned heavily against the desk, her face a mask of pain.
"Jemma, I think these gauntlets are toast..." she managed to make out before the younger woman rushed at her, grabbing her into a hug.

"Daisy, thank God..." she muttered, squeezing her tightly.

Behind them, several last aliens prepared to charge their unguarded backs. The door flung open, and everyone turned in time to see May and Robbie dispatch the last of them quickly.

"Fitzsimmons, Princess." May nodded. "Nice to see you again."

Robbie quickly stepped over towards Fitz, looking him over. He looked at Simmons, his face grim.

"He needs a doctor." he said quietly.

"Good thing we've got two." snapped Shuri.

"Get him to a table." ordered Jemma, releasing Daisy. "No time to lose..."

Steve’s universe had shrunk to blocks and strikes, pulling his opponent further and further away from Vision. He had to buy time for Wanda to get there...to get Vision back under Shuri's hands. He grunted, as he finally got under the alien’s guard, knocking the blasted staff out of his hands.

Glaive simply snarled and rushed at Steve, grabbing his uniform and sending him over the fallen trees in the Wakandan forest. Steve had no time to respond before his enemy was on top of him, hands encircling his throat. Spots formed in front of his eyes as he bucked and twisted, trying to get the being off of him. But it had been a long, hard fight, and Glaive was fresher, stronger. He pressed downwards on the human's throat, watching him squirm underneath him.

A crunch was all the warning Glaive had, then his world contracted down to a sharp pain blossoming. He stared down to see the blade from his staff protrude from his chest. He was lifted higher, off the human, and then thrown to the side.

Glaive's last sight was that of the robot, kneeling beside his comrade in the dust.

"I...failed?" he thought, as the darkness overtook him.

Steve pushed himself off the dirt, rubbing at his neck. He stared at Vision searchingly as he extended his hand to his friend.

"I thought I told you to go." Steve observed.

Vision gave him a small smile, favouring his wounded side.

"We don't trade lives, Captain." he responded.

On the field Clint, Nat, and Okoye had fought their way to T'Challa and Bucky. The group paused to survey the scene.

M'Baku swung his weapon, bashing another alien. They were fewer and further between after their leaders' demise. Many had simply dropped their weapons and were fleeing back towards the barrier,
pursued by the Jabari and remaining Avengers.

"MAYEFA!" M'Baku exclaimed gleefully.

The rest of the warriors rose their arms in response.

"YA HU!"

Hulk snorted bemusedly, and tore off after another group of outriders.

Groot sagged beside Rocket Raccoon.

"I am Groootttt..." he whined.

Rocket rolled his eyes.

"I've told you before," he scolded, "If you insist on spending all that time on that stupid game, of course you're going to be worn out in a fight."

The young sapling scowled, and Rocket's eyes narrowed.

"I am GROOT!"

"Watch your tone!"

Rocket turned his attention from his charge and gazed up into the sky. Thor was riding the air currents alongside the human ships and gliders, firing charges at fleeing aliens and ships alike. If they had anything to say about it, Thanos' army would be much reduced going forward. And maybe the story of Earth's stand would spread among the stars and put more heart into the next world Thanos tried to reduce.

_They had to make it out of there first_, Rocket thought. He thought back to the carnage on the prison ship and a chill ran through him.

Groot looked at him in concern.

"I am Groot?" he asked.

"Yeah, this isn’t over yet." the raccoon returned.

He put one hand on his son’s shoulder.

"Stay alert."

Wanda finally dropped to the forest floor, hurrying over to Vision and Steve.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Before she could start to give her lover a piece of her mind, a tremor ran through the android’s body.

Both Steve and Wanda looked at him in concern.

"What?" she asked, scanning him from head to foot. “What is it?”
Vision looked at them, a strange sensation coming over him from the Mind Stone.

_Fear._

"He's here." he told them quietly.

Wanda went pale. The wind picked up, whispering through their hair, rattling the leaves on the trees, moaning like a dying thing.

Steve took up a defensive position, scanning the area for this new threat. He tapped his com.

"Everyone, on my position. We have incoming."

In short order, Clint, and Natasha came into view, their eyes scanning for threats. They were quickly followed by T’Challa and Okoye. Bucky and...Hulk (?) loped into view, and Sam swooped down beside him.

"Thor’s not on coms.” he reported. “Rhodey’s gone out to find him.”

A thump behind him, and he turned to see Daisy Johnson land with Agent Melinda May and...

"Coulson’s Rider?” Steve asked.

The young man grimaced in return.

"Not anymore.” he replied sharply.

Steve dropped his gaze to Daisy’s arms.

"Your gauntlets?” he asked.

Daisy shook her head.

Steve sighed.

"Don’t use your powers.” he ordered.

Daisy drew her Wakandan weapon.

"Only if I have to, Cap.” she responded.

Steve met May’s eyes. The face she returned was as blank as Coulson’s ever was.

They had lost him. They weren’t losing his daughter as well.

Steve drew a breath as the wind picked up, and a crackle could be heard in the distance.

"Take your positions.”

Chapter End Notes

We’re here...
First, I’m sure I wasn’t the only interested in what happened to Shuri after they were attacked by Glaive in IW. Fitz’s injury mimics the one suffered in the Season 5 finale. It might be a little less life threatening here.....but that remains to be seen.

Secondly, hello Hulk! In this AU, he’s never beaten by Thanos, only bound by Ebony Maw in New York. Since Maw is dead...He just needed a little validation from his other half.

Next up...Destiny arrives. And I’m not talking the mutant.
Chapter Summary

The Avengers, Wakandans and Agents of SHIELD have one last chance to stop Thanos.

Will they succeed?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Rocket Racoon and Groot pelted onto the scene, the humans stood, staring, almost transfixed, at the black-blue cloud forming at the edge of the clearing.

*Come on...* Rocket thought, taking his stance beside Bucky Barnes. *Haven't any of these krutacking Terrans seen a teleportation before?*

"I am Groot."

"You said it, pal."

Natasha Romanoff watched the cloud extend and widen. Melinda May softly swore behind her.

"What the hell?" Natasha started.

The crackling edges of the cloud stabilized and the centre cleared, allowing the Avengers a quick glance at a spaceship interior before it was taken up by a massive purple being, armoured in blue and gold, who strolled over the threshold, and sank, just a little, into the Wakandan soil. The cloud collapsed behind him, and his gaze flitted over the heroes contemptuously until it landed on Vision.

Thanos smirked, flexing his golden Gauntlet.

In the trees, Clint Barton raised a bow and nocked the last of his explosive arrows.

"That's him." Clint confirmed. "Awaiting orders, Captain."

The heroes fanned out in front of Vision, weapons at the ready. Wanda swallowed, and took her place behind them, directly in front of her love.

"Eyes up. Stay sharp." Steve Rogers ordered, taking a step towards Thanos.

A roar came from the side, and Thanos staggered back as the Hulk rushed in, attempting to grapple with the Titan.

Steve and T'Challa looked at each other with exasperation, then stilled in dismay.

Thanos concentrated and a red light shone over the Hulk. In the blink of an eye, the large green
hands grasping the tunic had shrunk into those of Bruce Banner.

"Oh, shit..." swore Bruce, as Thanos easily tore him off, and sent him flying into an oncoming Captain America. The two went down in a cloud of dust.

An electric buzz came from behind, and Thanos dodged the oncoming Outrider swords, wielded expertly by Robbie Reyes.

He cocked an eyebrow.

"This is the thanks I get?" he rumbled.

A purple shot was expertly placed, and Reyes careened into the forest, collapsing against the foot of Clint's tree.

"A little gratitude would have been nice." Thanos grumbled as he advanced on his goal.

Silently, T'Challa lept at Thanos's chest, his claws reaching forward to rake his face. Thanos merely sneered, and grabbed the Wakandan by the throat, punching him to the ground. The armour quaked in response, a force field knocking everyone off balance.

Natasha cursed in Russian under her breath.

"Open fire!" she ordered.

Sam Wilson began his run, strafing the ground his his Steyr pistols. A bolt of red hit him, and from the corner of his eye, he could see the rubbery wings flap uselessly in the breeze.

As he rushed towards the earth, he heard Melinda May cry out.

"Daisy!"

"Got him!"

A force enveloped the flyer, and he was set gently down on the ground.

Behind Wanda, Vision watched the heroes fall, one by one. Their best chances were already out of commission.

Clint fired his explosive arrow, following them quickly with the barbed ends, aimed unerringly for the titan's eye.

A purple blast quickly disintegrated the arrows, exploding them harmlessly in mid-air. A blast of red followed, and Clint found himself wrapped around his quiver, falling from the tree, catching on a branch halfway to the forest floor.

As War Machine and Bucky opened fire, Vision caught Wanda's arm.

"Wanda." he said gently. "It's time."

Wanda kept her eyes on the battle.
"No," she said, in a voice that would brook no objection.

In front of them, War Machine fell to the side, his armour crushed around him like a tin can. Bucky followed next, flipping and rolling, lying still beside him, stunned.

Vision took Wanda by her shoulders.

"They can't stop him, Wanda, but we can."

He turned her to face him.

"Look at me." he asked, lifting her chin.

Her eyes met his, then mutinously flitted away.

"You have the power to destroy the stone." he urged.

Wanda looked at Vision, her eyes filling with tears.

"Don't." she begged.

Okoye snarled and activated her spear, hurling it in Thanos' direction. A purple blast stopped it in its tracks, throwing the Wakandan general to the ground. Natasha lept over her, but a red beam sent fingers of earth to snatch her from the air. They coiled around her, hardening as much as the rocky hills behind them.

From her stance, Melinda May noted that Thanos was being very careful not to kill any of them. He wants witnesses to his victory, she thought.

Vision shook his head, and gently stroked Wanda's cheek.

"You must do it." he told her. "Wanda, please. We are out of time."

"I can't." she sobbed, trembling against him.

From the rise above the forest, May, Daisy and Rocket opened fire on Thanos. Forming a purple shield around himself, another twist of his hand caused the red stone to gleam.

Steve leveraged himself to a sitting position and watched as their guns turned molten, flowing over the trio's hands and then hardening back into the gun metal.

"I AM GROOT!"

Groot plunged his fists into the ground, causing cables of roots and branches to wrap themselves around the Titan firmly. Thanos smiled gently at the young sapling, then flexed his limbs, breaking the bonds, sending them scattering around the battlefield.

Vision turned his attention urgently to Wanda.

"Yes, you can."

As she shook her head, Vision became more insistent.
"You can. If he gets the stone, half the universe dies."

Wanda wiped her eyes, and truly took in the situation around her, the Avengers and Agents downed, some just barely getting to their knees.

She drew Vision into an embrace, her words muffled against his shoulder.

"It's not fair."

Vision allowed himself one brief moment of contact, stroking her hair, kissing her temple. Then he pulled away, and sank to his knees, his eyes never leaving hers.

"It shouldn't be you, but it is."

He smiled at her, consoling her, encouraging her.

"It's all right. You could never hurt me. I just feel you."

Wanda bit back a sob, and nodded. She extended her hand, and started to beam the crimson energy at Vision's Mind Stone.

Thanos snarled at the sight, and hastened his advance. As Wanda added her left hand to her efforts, doubling the beams, Steve got to his feet and took a running slide underneath Thanos' arm. Thanos glared at the man, bashing at him like a mosquito. Steve darted among the blows, punching Thanos in his stomach and chin. He made a desperate grab at the gauntlet, trying to tear it from his hands.

Daisy focused outwards, and the metal split from her hands, falling around her feet.

"Now me!" demanded Rocket, earning an annoyed huff from May.

Daisy turned and watched Thanos slam a fist into the side of Steve's head. He fell to the ground, unconscious. There was now no one left between the Titan and Wanda.

The throb in her arms warned Daisy this would be a very bad idea. But there was no one left. She looked over at May.

"No...Daisy..." May gasped, seeing a all too familiar look in the daughter of her heart's eyes.

Daisy shook her head.

"I'm sorry May...I love you." Daisy swallowed hard. "Tell Coulson...when you get him back...I hope I made him proud."

She took several steps away from the group and stretched her arms in front of her. Thanos turned his head at the movement.

Daisy closed her eyes and allowed the Inhuman force to rip through her body. The shock knocked her enemy off his feet, and before he could move a finger, Daisy tossed him high, higher still into the air, her face rigid, the pain filled scream finally bursting through her lips as she redirected her force wave and sent him slamming into the ground, a crater forming as she drove him as deep as she could into the earth.
Finally, several moments... an eternity later for the rest...Daisy collapsed, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. May caught a glimpse of her face, bruised and blood swollen.

"Oh God...no..." May cried.

The air was still for a moment. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

As Wanda started to put her hands down, a blue black circle formed in front of the crater.

Thanos rolled out of the threshold, and pulled himself to one knee. He wiped the dirt from his face and swung to face his opponent. Seeing Daisy lying on the ground, he gave a grim nod, and then turned his attentions back to Wanda and Vision.

Wanda swung her left hand around, blasting with all of her might at the Titan. Thanos lifted his hand, and a blue purple energy shield re-formed around him. Step by step, he inched closer and closer to his goal.

Bruce watched on in dismay, his head reeling, unable to focus, to call out the Big Guy.

_He's been toying with us_, he thought. _We never really stood a chance._

Vision uttered a sigh, and Wanda concentrated to hear his faint words.

"It's all right." he breathed. "It's all right. I love you."

The yellow stone cracked along its facet lines. Wanda's last sight of him before the crystal shattered was a vision of peace and contentment.

The Mind Stone exploded outwards, the the trees shuddering as the force passed through them.

Wanda dropped to her knees. It was over. It was all over. She didn't care if Thanos killed her now. First her brother, now her love...she could not, would not take anymore.

Thanos' face twisted into what looked like sympathy.

"I understand, my child. Better than anyone." he said quietly as he approached her.

"You could never." she snarled.

Thanos reached down to stroke her hair. She flinched, but held still.

In her earth prison, Natasha’s eyes narrowed. Thanos was up to something...but she couldn't quite place it..

Thanos put a hand on Wanda's shoulder.

"Today, I lost more than you can know. But now is no time to mourn."

He stepped back, and Nat's heart stopped.

_Time..."
Thanos smiled at them.

"Now is no time at all."

Thanos clenched the gauntlet, and made a strange gesture. A green gleam flashed, and a bead of yellow light gathered in on itself. As Wanda watched in horror, it grew in size, finally, solidifying into an intact and conscious Vision. He stared at them, disoriented and confused.

"NO!" she screamed.

Wanda threw herself in front of Vision, her hands contracting. Thanos merely shrugged, and swatted her to the ground. Dazed, she turned over to see Thanos lift her lover by his throat, and examine him as if he were of no consequence. He dug his fingers into Vision's forehead, the metal splitting easily. Contracting his fingers, he gave one final tug, and the Mind Stone pulled free. The colour drained from Vision's body, and Thanos tossed him aside, lifeless.

Bringing his hand up, Thanos moved the Mind Stone over the last opening in the gauntlet. It seemed to fight him, it resisted joining its fellows, it tried to roll out of his fingers, fall to the ground. Snarling, Thanos jammed the Stone into the last setting.

The backlash was unlike any that Thanos had felt before. He roared in pain and shock as the power of combined Infinity Stones shot throughout his body. He rode the sensations, knowing that if he could survive this, he would truly be the master of the Gauntlet. In mere moments, the energy subsided, and the stones gleamed in the Terran sunlight.

As Thanos took a moment to savor his victory, to truly prepare himself for what was to occur, a massive bolt of lighting came from the clear blue sky, pushing him back into the mountainside that had kept careful vigil. He snarled in return, preparing to strike whoever was left when a swish sounded towards him, a sharp shock pinning him to the rock. As his eyes cleared, he saw the last of the Asgardians glaring at him. The woman nodded and stepped back.

Thor raised Stormbreaker above his head and hurled it carefully. Thanos's face went wide with shock, and he fired the whole power of the Gauntlet against it... the five colours melding together... but the axe slammed through it, right into his chest.

Valkyrie handed him her dagger, and Thor strode over to a dazed and weakened Thanos.

"You will die...slowly and painfully...for what you have done to me and mine!"

Thor took hold of the back of Thanos’ head, forcing the Stormbreaker deeper and deeper into his chest.

No, thought Nat, struggling against her bonds. Finish it now, don't give him the chance to...

Thor leaned in closer, taking in his enemy’s dying gasps.

"You should've... You...."

Thanos’ voice trailed off. Thor paused and looked for the death grimace in his face. Instead, Thanos lifted his head easily, and smirked at the thunder god.

"You should've gone for the head."

Thor watched, aghast, as the Titan quickly bent his elbow and raised his Gauntleted fist.
Chapter End Notes

So, trust me. Really...There are still several concerned parties to be heard from here.

(OK, vague cryptic hint...there are no content typos in this chapter...)

Next up...second verse, same as the first... just from a different angle. ;}

SNAP
Chapter Summary

The view of the Battle of Wakanda from inside the Infinity Gauntlet.

Chapter Notes

All right - Avengers 4 Trailer has dropped!

Not that it has anything to do with this story... ;)

Infinity Gauntlet

Phil Coulson stood, unmoving. His patience levels had only increased over the last year. The Infinity Stones twinkled deceptively high above him. There was still one missing, he could see the black oval where the Mind Stone was “meant” to be.

Phil was certain that his Agents, the Avengers, and whoever else they could round up (like King T’Challa and his forces) would make a valiant final stand. But he and Gamora had run the scenarios. As soon as Thanos had gotten three of the stones, it really didn’t matter which three, he would have become unstoppable. It would take a miracle now to defeat him outside in the real world.

In here, though, well, that was another matter.

Phil hoped.

A choked cry came from behind him. He turned, to see the image of Gamora fade away. She said that she would keep him company for as long as possible, but when Thanos began to activate the stones, she would be shunted into a limbo. Where they supposed he was meant to exist, except for some cosmic loopholes.

He caught her eye and nodded. She gave a faint smile in return and vanished.

If there was one thing Phil was good at, it was finding the loopholes and exploiting them.

Now all he had to do was wait. Maybe they were wrong, maybe there was a way…

The blue stone quivered and light flooded the room. Phil stood on its edge, careful not to get too close.

*The Space Stone – Thanos is going somewhere.*

The blue formed itself into a ball and winked out of existence.

Phil braced himself. It was time.
The red shot out angrily, and Phil thought he could hear a familiar roar echo throughout the chamber before subsiding sullenly.

*Dr. Banner…*

A purple beam followed quickly, and he could feel an desperate, needing hum in the back of his mind. Something he hadn’t felt since he made that deal to defeat AIDA.

*Robbie?*

The red again, flying around the chamber walls, making Phil duck as it passed over him, them plummeting to the Gauntlet’s centre, and a strange feeling of embarrassed resignation swept over him.

*That must be one of the flyers…*

Then two beams, one after the other, purple following red sizzling up like an arrow through the ovals. Phil heard the twang of an bowstring breaking in the distance.

*Clint, then…*

Again, red light, a feeling of constriction, knocking him off balance. From his knees, Phil watched as a purple blast followed, the stunning backash sending him reeling.

As he blinked the black spots from his eyes, another pair followed, a purple blast meant for destruction, and red, separating into fingers, reaching up to bind someone somewhere. Familiar Russian curses filled his mind.

*Natasha…*

Phil felt a glimmer of hope. There was a good number of fighters that had come together. Maybe just sheer numbers could do it.

A purple haze filled the room, and Phil quickly stepped backwards into the relative safety of his room with the Soul Stone.

A red wave, like molten lava flew upwards, and the resulting shrieks of shock and anger suddenly chilled him.

*May…no…and *Daisy*…*

That son of a bitch had done something to his family.

Phil’s eyes narrowed. He was going to make Thanos pay for that.

The purple haze circled the room, keeping Phil back. No other colours blasted out to join it. Maybe they were winning, keeping the bastard on the defense. Or, what was more likely, given the general feeling of satisfaction permeating the chambers, maybe Thanos was dealing with them without using the Gauntlet.

Suddenly, the haze disappeared. The Stones stilled, going opaque, then…darkening?

Phil inched out of his hiding place and peered upwards. Yes, no light was shining through the stones. It was almost as if they had been buried in something.

Had they done it?
A flood of blue shot up, just inches from Phil’s face. He could feel the Space Stone’s power, sucking at him, trying to pull him in. He desperately grasped at the walls, finding minute finger holds…make that fingernail holds…and he hung on with all of his might. Just as he lost his grip, it stopped, and Phil fell heavily to the ground.

Groaning, he sat up. *He was dead…wasn’t he immune to pain*, he thought, rubbing his side.

*You aren’t dead…will you focus…* Gamora snarled in his mind.

*Fair enough*, he thought, getting to his feet.

Nothing. Then a sense of…rage…being cheated. It subsided. Then glee.

*Uh oh.*

A green beam snaked up through the air, turning and whirling counter clockwise, making Phil dizzy just looking at it. Everything seemed to be going backwards?

It disappeared, and an immediate sense of triumph filled the room.

Phil swallowed hard.

*He’s done it*, he thought.

The room shook, as it hadn’t before, and a yellow stone slotted into place.

The resulting power rush from all the stones threw Phil back to the floor, overwhelming him.

Something…yellow…curled around him.

*You must focus…* a robotic voice said in his mind. *Focus on what is important, what you are here for…*

A green sardonic tendril…*God knows they won’t…*

*It comes down to you…* a yellow caress…*it comes.*

As the rush faded, Phil got back on his feet.

Another shudder, and he felt a pressure build up behind him.

“PHIL!!”

He turned, and saw the orange stone open, and its beam shoot towards him.

“NO!” he gasped, reflexively bringing up his hands.

The orange beam stopped in front of him. A general sense of unhappiness came from it. It wanted to follow its orders, join its fellows in a rainbow burst behind him. It inched forward.

Phil looked at it for a moment, then pulled himself together. The glare he gave the beam was one he had given countless SHIELD baby agents. It was the one he had given Tony Stark to keep him in line. And, God help him, it was the one he had used, regularly, to keep a rag tag group of Agents into a semblance of order.

He drew himself up.
“Absolutely NOT.” he spat out.

He could feel the orange beam tense, making a decision.

“I am SHIELD Director Phil Coulson, I have faced down gods, HYDRA and other monsters. This isn't my first rodeo.” he responded. “I don’t care who put you here, it was my death that brought you into being, my sacrifice that brought you into play. Thanos may have taken you from Agent May, but I am your Master.”

Phil took a step forward. The orange beam…recoiled. He gave it a smile that had struck fear into friend and foe alike.

“You. Answer. To. ME.”

The orange beam hung there for a moment, considering.

A sense of acquiescence. The Soul Stone would obey this human.

The beam vanished.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Phil snarked.

A general sense of orange warning filled his mind. A scene entered his thoughts; Thanos pinned by a weapon, Thor standing over him, his hands on the blade, driving it deeper. Valkyrie standing beside him, wearing her grief like a cloak. Righteousness exuding from all their pores.

Focus…

Phil realized that the stones were not only talking about him.

“You should’ve…”

Phil straightened up. Carefully, he took out his sunglasses and slipped them on.

No fear. No hesitation.

“You…”

No doubt.

“You should’ve gone for the head.”

Elbow up. Phil cocked his head.

SNAP.

The beam flooded over Phil Coulson’s waiting form, and his world turned to orange.

CODA

Wakanda

Thanos looked down at the Gauntlet, shrugging off the Stormbreaker as if it were a toy.

Maybe a few minutes…he thought. Come to think of it, he never really thought of how it would
happen next.

“Thanos, son of... A’lars.”

The words echoed in his mind. Thanos frowned, puzzled.

“Oh, God…” whispered Steve Rogers, realizing where he had heard the voice before.

“Steve?” questioned Bucky Barnes beside him, helping him to his feet.

“I’m Director Phil Coulson, with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division.”

New Avengers Mansion

“Just call us SHIELD.” whispered Pepper Potts from her prison bed. Lance Hunter beamed beside her.

"Knew he'd do it..."

Washington, DC

Beside an awestruck Agent Piper, Glen Talbot put his head in his hands.

“That man is going to be even more insufferable.” he groaned.

Mace and Maddox School For Enhanced Children, New York State

Kamala Khan looked up from her dog's ear rub.

"Who's Phil Coulson?"

Wakanda

Thanos brought the Gauntlet up, a horrible realization dawning on his face.

Later, Melinda May always swore she could hear the smirk in the very next thing Phil Coulson had to say.

“Can we talk for a moment?”

Chapter End Notes

So, out of all the various choices in the MCU, it all came down to Phil Coulson to save half the universe? But of course, 'cause that's what he does. His scope is just a little bit wider here. ;-)

I do believe that as soon as Thanos got his hands on three of the stones, then yes, it was all over for our Avengers (as long as he had someone to...err..."love"). Remember, it was said somewhere that once Thanos controlled two of them, he became the most powerful person in the universe. You could argue if Peter Quill or Thor had managed to keep their heads in their respective battles, then something might have changed...but
maybe not. Thanos would have been pretty powerful without the Gauntlet, who's to say that he wouldn't have just smashed whoever took the glove and got it back? And yes, Thor should've gone for the head. It's all speculative now...especially with the Endgame trailer release.

(Note about that...does anyone remember that the original Infinity War trailer got released with fake scenes in it? Personally, I'd treat anything that Marvel has to say about A4 with extreme caution.)

So next up, Coulson lays it all out on the line for Thanos. Who attacked Melinda May.

Thanos had better start running.
The Voice In The Dark

Chapter Summary

Phil spells it all out for a very confused Thanos.

And a familiar figure appears, one last time, to help get things back to where they belong.

Chapter Notes

Title is taken from Chapter 13 of The Tie That Binds. If you’re curious, that is... ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wakanda

"I was warned not to underestimate you."

"You should have listened."

Thanos resisted the urge to shake the Infinity Gauntlet. He looked around at the Terrans climbing to their feet, listening intently. He decided to play for time...there had to be some way to salvage this.

Phil Coulson's voice huffed.

"It's over, Thanos."

It's never over...he thought.

"This time, it is." Coulson informed him. "No last minute escapes, no second chances."

Thanos hung his head, feigning defeat.

"What did I miss?" he asked quietly.

A moment of quiet consideration.

"Possession doesn't imply mastery." was the reply.

"The Soul Stone." Thanos rumbled.

His head swung around, finding the Terran he had taken the Stone from. His eyes narrowed, and he took a step towards Melinda May, Gauntlet outstretched.

"If you move another muscle," Coulson said sharply, "If you even think about using the Gauntlet,
then I will finish this, right now."

The world started to swirl around him. Thanos immediately halted, and it came back into focus.

"So much for the fabled Terran justice and mercy." Thanos bit out.

"Justice? Mercy?" Coulson snorted. "You just tried to kill half of all known life in the universe. You're not one to talk."

"I was restoring balance..."

"Spare me. I'm not interested in your reasons. I'm interested in stopping you. And making sure you can never do this again."

"Why you?"

"Because the Soul Stone is the keeper of a sort of wisdom, Thanos. And when I accepted that wisdom, I also accepted that I would need to take action based on it."

"How?" Thanos pleaded.

_He had come so close... where did it all go wrong?

"When you and your daughter went to Vormir, was there anyone else present?"

"No..."

"Ah." Coulson paused for a moment. "There was a guardian. One who made the same mistake you did, only with another stone, who let May and I know what was required. A sacrifice of someone you loved. A soul for soul. Only one who made that trade could ever be Master of the Soul Stone."

"But...I did..." started Thanos. "Gamora..."

"You threw her off the mountain out of anger." Coulson replied heatedly. "Don't even think to pretend any sort of love was involved. In any case, how can you claim to love one you could kill so easily?"

"You hypocrite." Thanos snarled. "Your May did exactly that to get the Stone. And for no reason other than to keep it from me."

"You still don't get it, do you?" Coulson asked. "Melinda didn't sacrifice me for the Stone. I sacrificed me. No one pushed me, Thanos. I jumped. And that is the difference. I loved her enough to give everything I had for her. Including my life."

Coulson paused.

"And that is the wisdom of the Soul Stone, a love you cannot understand."

Thanos' eyes flickered back to Melinda May, who gazed back at him impassively.

"And you needed the Soul Stone, the power of life and death." Coulson continued. "But that is mine, and I will not assist you in your mission. There are consequences on calling on power that is not
yours to claim. And your bill has come due."

"Wait..."

"Good-bye, Thanos."

Somewhere, Phil Coulson lifted his hand and examined his fingers.

**SNAP.**

As the Terran heroes watched, Thanos began to disintegrate, flake by flake. He looked down in horror, then his gaze steeled, and he looked back at the gathering.

"This is not over." he snarled. "This is..."

The Gauntlet clattered to the ground into a pile of dust. The coloured gems loosened in their sockets, and rolled out to scatter on the forest floor.

Steve Rogers looked around. Avengers and Agents alike were gathering together. But Thanos's work had not come undone on his disappearance. Clint's quiver gently swung back and forth on limb where it had caught. And Melinda May knelt by the still figure of Daisy Johnson, her imprisoned hands caressing her cheek.

"So that's where those got to!"

Everyone swung around, weapons at the ready.

A frail, slender old man approached the dust pile. He gazed at them serenely through large glasses.

"Where did he come from?" asked Bucky Barnes.

Steve shrugged.

"I'll take care of these for you." the man offered, stooping to pick them up.

"Wait..." called Rocket Raccoon.

He might be a jerk sometime, but he didn't want to see the old guy bite the dust.

"I am GROOT!" Groot agreed urgently.

The old man gave the Guardians a piercing look. Then he gathered the stones into his hands as if they were Dollar Store specials and stood up.

"What the..." Rocket started.

The old man winked.

"I think..." he said, holding a red gem to the light. "You all would feel much better in your usual forms."

The red stone flashed, and the gun metal vanished from May and Rocket's hands.
"HEY!" Clint Barton called out, as he fell out of his tree, landing hard on the ground.

The man smiled.

"Time to send these back to where they belong."

The stones flashed, and disappeared.

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Titan

Stephen Strange stared in shock at the green gem that had reappeared before him. He reached out hesitantly and grabbed it.

Tony Stark looked on, bemusedly, the Peters at his side.

"This..." Strange started, "I didn't see this coming. It wasn't one of the futures..."

Tony shrugged.

"Guess we make our own destiny sometimes. Agent does seem to make that a habit."

Peter Parker looked around.

"So, how do we get home from here?" he asked.

Peter Quill grinned at him.

"Oh, I think we can fit a few more in the Milano. Shouldn't take us too long to get to Earth..."

---

Wakanda

The old man approached Melinda May. He held out the orange stone to her.

"I believe this belongs to you, my dear."

May took it.

"Can I..." she motioned at Daisy.

"Follow your instincts." he advised.

May hesitated, then put the stone on her charge's chest. It glowed for a bit, covering the young Inhuman, then subsided. Daisy's chest began to rise and fall slowly.

Picking up the stone, May was flooded with a familiar sense of concern.

_Hurry..._

She looked up at the man.
"Thank you." she said.

The man nodded back.

"Repay me by getting that partner of yours out of there as quickly as possible," he snarked. "He's driving me nuts..."

As he began to fade, Bruce Banner approached him.

"Wait..." he said. "Who are you?"

The older man smiled, and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'm the Watcher," he said simply. "And now it's time for me to have a little rest, Dr. Banner."

He gazed around at the rest.

"I don't understand..." Bruce responded, feeling like he was about to lose something.

"You don't need to," the man replied, his eyes twinkling.

"Excelsior!" he proclaimed.

The man faded and vanished from sight.

Clint looked at Thor confusedly.

"Who was that?"

Thor merely shook his head.

"I have no idea..."

CODA

Infinity Gauntlet

The world pieced itself back together, flake by flake.

Thanos looked around. He was on a orange beach, waves gently lapping at the shoreline. A ball of light hung in the orange sky, and he looked at his hands, almost expecting them to be the same colour. No, they were still purple, he was clothed in his blue and orange armour.

The only thing missing was the Gauntlet.

He scowled. He didn't know how, but he would escape. And then he would recapture the Stones. And then he would devote his time to tracking down those Terrans and...

"Not this time."

Thanos whirled around at the voice.
Gamora stood across from him, swords at rest. She looked at him as if he was a bug to be crushed under her foot.

"Daughter."

She shook her head.

"You forfeited any right to the title of Father when you killed me." she responded quietly.

"And now you're here to repay the favour." he said.

She shook her head.

"I'm here to stop you. For good."

Thanos looked her up and down.

"You think you can with those toys?" he asked.

A slow smile spread over her face.

"I know I can."

He spread his arms wide.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Gamora squared her jaw.

And charged.

Chapter End Notes

First, farewell to the Cameo King of the MCU, Stan Lee. These chapters were in progress when he died in November 2018, and he was always meant to sort out the Stones for Melinda and the rest. But now, I sadly let him go, with the rest of the world, to a well deserved rest. Excelsior, Stan...and thank you.

Now, back to AU life:

I've explained elsewhere what I think Phil Coulson to be in the MCU, so I think it's very fitting here that Coulson's rather distinctive voice is the one that sends Thanos onto his version of the Soul World. Where Gamora has first claim on him (Thanos should have run). On the other hand, as we saw last chapter, there's a whole lot of people listening into that conversation...and they now know the names of Phil Coulson and Melinda May. That's not gonna be that much of a problem, is it? ;)

And do you really think we'd leave our transformed characters in the lurch? Although Daisy could still be in trouble...hope Shuri and Jemma are done with Fitz...
Next up...it's time for some mopping up. You know...I wonder how Aunt May is going to take Peter Parker going offworld...

And there still is a little...small, really...minute...matter of a DEAL?

(Phil just can't stay out of trouble...)
**Avengers: Aftermath**

Chapter Summary

With Thanos defeated, it's time for the Avengers, Guardians and Agents to regroup in Wakanda. And it is time to start planning new paths forward.

There's just a few hurdles and loose ends to tie up...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Wakanda**

*2 Days Later*

"T'Challa..."

T'Challa looked up from his desk at his lover Nakia, acting as head diplomat for Wakanda.

"No."

"It's the OAS this time."

"Wakanda never joined the OAS."

Nakia smirked at him.

"They don't particularly care at this point. Want to know what they're asking?"

T'Challa groaned.

"Please tell me they're offering 'humanitarian' assistance to a country attacked by aliens."

"Nope."

Nakia perched on his desk.

"Phil..."

"Don't say it..."

"...Coulson," Nakia continued, her eyes shimmering with mirth. "Oh, and Melinda May this time. Which should probably move their representative up the contact list."

She chuckled at the face he made at her, then sobered.

"T'Challa...you have to tell the world something."
He shook his head.

"What, Nakia? That we just beat back a overwhelming alien force no one saw coming? We prevented the loss of half the life in the universe...just who is going to believe that on our say so?"

Nakia made a face.

"And where is Stark and his lot?" T'Challa continued. "Even I'm not sure who this Phil Coulson is...except that Captain Rogers and the Avengers seem to think he's their leader."

"He's been trending on Twitter for the last 2 days..."

T'Challa scowled at her.

"No...I need to find out what went on. And then we can look outward, contact the UN, the US, the OAS..."

The door opened, and another Wakandan diplomat came through.

"Yes?" T'Challa asked.

"My liege, I have Lloyds of London on the phone. They are very...insistent."

T'Challa looked at Nakia.

"I don't think we've finished the paperwork on our side for the insurance claims..."

"No, my King."

She glanced sideways at Nakia.

"It's about a payout, 6 years ago, on the life insurance policy on one Agent Phil Coulson of SHIELD. They want it back."

As Nakia roared with laughter, T'Challa put his head in his hands and groaned.

The door opened again, admitting Sharon Carter and Okoye.

Nakia and T'Challa stood up.

Sharon nodded at them.

"They're here."

As T'Challa strode out in the warm Wakandan afternoon, he surveyed the assembled gathering. Then, spying who he was looking for, he made his way through the group. Gently pushing past Bucky Barnes and M'Baku, he caught Steve Rogers' eye.

"Did you take care of everything on your end?" he asked.

"Everyone's here," responded Steve. "And I've been assured that the ship won't even be a blip on any Earth screen."
Rocket Raccoon looked over and gave the two men a slow smile.

T'Challa rubbed the back of his neck.

"Why doesn't the word of a raccoon make me feel any better?" he mused.

Steve chuckled.

"Oh...it wasn't Rocket. Or Groot."

Natasha came up beside them.

"He's advising everyone to move back a bit." she said taking their arms and pulling them backward.

"He's going to do this alone?" Steve asked her in surprise.

Nat grinned at him, and they turned as a portal formed in from of the group, growing wider and taller with each pulse. T'Challa scanned the group, and saw Wong with Wanda Maximoff in deep concentration at the back, working in tandem to augment each other's powers.

"She and Wong have been talking about her studying for a while at Kamar-Taj." Nat noted, following his gaze.

"It would be good for her, I think." agreed T'Challa. "How about Vision...when he is repaired?"

"Well, when your girlfriend can raise portals to cross the world in a heartbeat..." Steve added.

While Steve's comment was lighthearted, T'Challa felt a bit uneasy, and a slight chill ran down his back.

"I saw her power against Thanos." he observed. "And with proper training...she could be very dangerous."

"Says the King of the only country with vibranium." said Bucky behind him quietly.

"We're all dangerous to the world in our own ways," added Clint Barton, joining the group. "But we've made the choice to protect it."

"You mean shield it." said Melinda May, sliding in behind Clint.

"How's Daisy?" T'Challa asked.

"Shuri and Simmons still have her in a medical coma." May said. "They're waiting for her bones to reknit before doing anything else to strengthen them. Fitz is running simulations from his bed, while he's scanning the mind stone to rebuild Vision."

They all watched as the portal stabilized.

"It wasn't a sure thing that she'd survive." May continued. "But they think that she'll be on the road to recovery by the time we get back."

Clint looked at her in surprise.

"Get back? You going somewhere, May?"
A starship gently sailed through the portal, touching down on the ground. It powered down.

"Yes." May said simply, heading towards the ship behind a whooping Rocket and Groot. The ship door opened, and a young man stepped out, blinking against the bright sunlight.

"Well..." Peter Quill quipped, looking around. "This sure looks a lot different than what I remember..."

"I am GROOT!" Groot cried, flinging his arms around him.

"Yeah...I'm glad to see you too, pal..." Quill responded. "Hey, Rocket."

The raccoon bared his teeth.

"Now you lot show up, after the fight. Glad we were here to save your ass. Again." he snarked.

Peter's face went still for a moment.

"Yeah," he agreed, catching Rocket off guard. "So am I."

As he left, Rocket stared after his back. Turning his head, he caught the arm of Drax.

"Hey, what was that all about?" he asked.

Drax shrugged.

"Quill screwed up. We lost." he answered following Nebula and Mantis towards a beaming Thor.

Rocket suddenly felt cold in the African sunlight.

"Oh."

"HEY!"

All heads swung towards the ship.

A bruised and battered Tony Stark jumped down to the ground.

"I want you all to know..." he proclaimed, heading towards the group, "that you all are invited to my wedding. Even you, Rogers."

Tony's restless eyes scanned the group, searching for Pepper. Sam Wilson and James Rhodes exchanged a quick glance and began to head in his direction.

"What, you had two days, guys...couldn't one of you pick my fiancee up for the party?" Tony demanded. "Or did SI fall apart while I was gone?"

He flashed a smile.

"Oh, someone please tell me we went under so I don't have to go to any more board meetings in my
Rhodey pushed past Steve and T'Challa muttering, "I got this."

Tony turned to meet him, his jovial act fading quickly.

"Hey Rhody. What is it...where is she...is she..."

"She's OK," Rhodey confirmed, shepherding his friend into the Wakandan building. "But yeah, we gotta talk."

"What.."

The doors closed behind them.

Sam leaned in.

"Rhodey's got this. But I don't think Tony will be sticking around too long once he breaks the news about Pepper."

Steven nodded somberly.

"We can meet once they've figured things out. Not that we're going anywhere anytime soon."

T'Challa cocked an eyebrow.

"We figured we'd stick around, help with the rebuild." Bucky told him. "Least I could do, anyways."

"Except Clint. He needs to head back home, probably with Tony." Nat added.

Clint nodded.

"I'll be in touch once I have my family sorted out. Especially after what happened with Thanos. They need me for a bit."

Steve slapped him gently on the back.

"You came through when we needed you. Again. Thank you." he said.

"Did something happen to Ms. Potts?" asked Peter Parker, looking around for someone familiar in the throng.

Steve smiled.

"The kid from Queens, right?"

Peter grinned back.

"Yeah, old guy from Brooklyn."

He glanced nervously around.
"Are we using real names or made up names?" he asked.

Clint chuckled and began to speak.

"Actually..."

"PETER!!"

Peter's eyes widened as he saw the woman running towards him.

"Aunt May?" he gasped.

He quickly looked at T'Challa.

"Can I claim asylum?" he asked.

"Don't you DARE..."

His aunt grabbed him in a tight embrace. The two clung together laughing and crying at the same time.

"Aunt May, I'm so sorry..."

"Don't you EVER do something like that again, Peter Parker. EVER..."

T'Challa moved his group away from the two, wanting to give them a little space. He looked over to see a quiet Stephen Strange, in consultation with Wanda and Wong. He looked up and waved for them to to join them.

"I was just saying," Strange continued, "now that the stones have been scattered throughout the universe again, we should start tracking their location."

Steve shook his head.

"I think, Doctor," he replied, "there are somethings that are much better left alone."

"The Gauntlet is destroyed." Wanda agreed. "It will take a long, long time before someone will have the actual power to harness them, let alone the desire to do so."

*Except maybe you*, T'Challa thought.

Strange sighed, and Wong rolled his eyes at him.

"You can barely use the Stone you have without getting into trouble, Strange." Wong said. "You'd do much better focusing on what you have in front of you."

"I don't think we'll make the same mistake on turning our back to the stars." T'Challa said.

Steve laughed, and jerked his head towards the Guardians.

"I don't think they'll let us."
"And how do you propose to deal with that?" asked T'Challa.

"I think we call on old friends." Steven responded, heading towards Thor.

T'Challa looked at Strange.

"It's that Coulson person again, isn't it?"

Strange lifted an eyebrow.

"Everything in good time, your Majesty."

Thor peeled off from the Guardians and clapped Steve on the back, staggering him a little.

"So, we have won the day again, good Captain."

"So it seems."

"And yet..." Thor sighed. "I have lost so much over the past couple of years. My home. My people...my brother..."

Thor swallowed hard.

"It is hard to know where to begin again."

Steve put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"You'll always have a place with us here. As for your people...I know of at least one other who found shelter on Earth over the last millennium or so."

Thor perked up noticeably.

"Really?"

Steve nodded.

"There is no reason there couldn't be others out there."

Thor's eyes gleamed.

"I would very much like to meet this Asgardian."

Overhearing this, Clint sighed.

"You want to tell Randolph, or shall I?" he asked Nat, who merely grinned evilly at him.

"I think it would be an excellent surprise..." she returned.

As the various groups made their way indoors for the debriefing ("You mean, party?" asked Rocket), May made her way over towards Strange, who was in conversation with Quill.

Strange looked at her.
"Are you ready?" he asked.

May nodded, and looked at Quill.

"You coming?" she asked.

"Yeah." he responded. "I need to see her body. Maybe take her home to rest with her people."

May's hand closed over the Soul Stone.

"There's still hope." she said quietly. "For all of us. For those who defended us."

"Who died for us." Robbie Reyes finished, coming towards them.

May's eyes flashed.

"Oh, no." she said sharply. "You're not getting within ten feet of..."

"Something tells me you need me." Robbie shot back. "If you want Coulson truly freed, that is."

"The deal..." Quill whispered.

Robbie nodded.

"Everything must be in balance, Agent May." Strange added. "I would strongly advise that Reyes comes with us."

"Fine." May snarked. "But you try to collect on it and I swear..."

"Don't." Robbie interrupted, turning his back on her. "Let's get moving."

Dr. Strange concentrated, and a portal appeared. The 4 humans stepped through it and it closed behind them.

---

**Washington, DC**

Brigadier General Glenn Talbot watched as the Quinjet expertly touched down on the base. He instinctively checked his squadron behind him. They stood at attention, their eyes fixed on the incoming plane.

Agent Piper smirked.

"You can stand down, Talbot. They're in good hands."

Talbot cracked his knuckles and Piper winced.

"She slipped through my fingers before," he growled. "I'm not letting it happen again."

The plane door opened, and a younger blond woman, heavily chained, looked out over the awaiting group. She smirked.
"Aww..." Ruby Hale cooed. "All of you here for little ol' me?"

Piper's eyes narrowed, then she smiled at the metallic hand which came to rest on Ruby's shoulder. Ruby scowled, and headed down the steps.

"Mike!" Piper cried. "It is so good to see you!"

Mike 'Deathlok' Johnson returned the smile as he escorted his prisoner down the stairs.

"Figured I'd lend a hand, after Vijay told me what had happened....hailed HQ, got a ride in with this lot."

Katherine Hale, with Lance Hunter by her side, descended next. Hunter brought her up in front of Talbot.

"Brigadier General." she greeted him.

"General." he returned. "You have a lot to answer for."

"I'm sure we have a lot to talk about." Katherine said. "If the circumstances were reversed, there's a lot I'd want to wring out of you too. I'm sure you'd be happy to comply."

"No way in hell. Take her away." he ordered, and the troops led the mother and daughter into the armoured vehicle.

They turned back to see a shaky Pepper Potts escorted off the jet by Bobbi Morse. Piper and Talbot moved to meet her.

"General. Agents." Pepper acknowledged.

She looked towards the military vehicles pulling away.

"Aren't I being arrested?" she asked softly.

Talbot shook his head.

"From what we can gather, Ms. Potts, you were just as much as a victim as any of the rest of those that suffered from the Faustus brainwashing."

Piper touched her arm.

"General Talbot has dealt with deprogramming other victims." she assured Pepper. "And Agent Morse has offered her assistance as well."

"And accusing the head of Stark Industries as being under the spell of HYDRA would...OUCH!"

Hunter broke off and winced as Bobbi slapped him sharply across the back of his head.

"I apologize..." she started, but Pepper held up her hand.

"Lance isn't wrong." she said.
"Well, thank...HEYYYY!"

Piper glared at Hunter as she removed her hand from his earlobe.

"Tony...does he know?"

Bobbi shook her head.

"I don't know. T'Challa said he would probably be back soon, but we don't know when."

The Agents carefully didn't glance at Talbot, who huffed slightly.

"Don't mind me..." he snarked. "I'm just here covering your enhanced asses..."

"I'd expect they would brief him, and he'll get back here as soon as he can." Bobbi finished gently.

"And until he shows up, we need your help getting the SI systems back up and running from whatever your hooligans wound up doing to it." Talbot finished.

The group piled into Talbot's waiting van. As the car pulled away, Piper discreetly pulled out a jamming device. Talbot discreetly ignored it.

"Any word about Phil?" Bobbi asked.

"Nothing since Thanos and that mass broadcast." Piper sighed. "We're going to have to come up with something soon, the press has already put SHIELD and Phil Coulson together. And his obituary from New York was public knowledge. Jameson is already screaming about a cover up in his editorials."

"How about the rest of them?" Hunter asked.

"Well, May said Fitz and Daisy were hurt pretty bad...said Simmons would get back to us once things stabilized." Piper responded. "Yo-Yo came through surgery all right, but is still out of it. Mack's wanting to know what we have for robotic arms."

They were silent for a while.

"Fine, fuck it..." said Hunter abruptly. "What about Steve and the rest?"

Talbot leaned forward.

"Secretary Gregg is working the UN with the Wakandans to reopen Sokavia." he said. "If Rogers and the others will play ball, I can pretty much guarantee a full blanket pardon within the week. But they have to be willing to have some sort of oversight for the Avengers. Especially with the Inhumans now out there....we can't go back to forced registration, but there has to be some middle ground."

Everyone looked at each other.

"We might have some ideas." said Bobbi carefully.
"Do they include Phil Coulson?" asked Talbot.

"Err...maybe....?" responded Hunter.

Talbot put his head in his hands and groaned.

"Great...just...great. Even when he's dead, I can't get rid of him..."

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year everyone...I hope all had a good holiday season. Here's to some happy resolutions for our Marvel friends in 2019

(Yeah, I know. But one can hope...)

So even though Thanos has been beaten, there still will be scars. Peter Quill knows just how close they came to losing and his role in it. Daisy and Fitz are hospitalized, and Vision needs to be resurrected with whatever was left behind from the Mind Stone scan. Thor still has lost pretty much everything and everyone. And there still is that Deal hanging over a certain Director's head. The important thing: everyone is alive to process and deal with it. And they'll be dealing with everyone's issues together. That is, if we can get Sokavia out of the way... ;-)

And I thought it was a nice twist having Talbot take Hale into custody. Because, as all of us AOS fans know, there was a reality where the reverse was true. Now, just where did that Gravitonium go?

Next up...an extra chapter. It's time to settle this frigging deal once and for all. Set course for Vormir.
Pray I Don't Alter It Any Further...

Chapter Summary

Dr. Strange, Melinda May, Peter Quill and Robbie Reyes return to Vormir to retrieve Phil Coulson and Gamora, sacrificed to the Soul Stone.

But what happens when a deal with a demon intersects with an Infinity Stone?

Chapter Notes

Yeah, you know the quote....

(Chapter warning: self sacrifice death)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vormir

It was snowing.

Melinda May still hated the snow.

Dr. Strange's portal had brought them to the bottom of the mountain. Phil Coulson and Gamora's bodies lay sprawled, side by side, their hands touching. The snow fell around them, forming a light drift, but did not cover them, as if forming a barrier between them and the rest of the world.

May tilted her head and looked up. She could barely see the edge of the plateau from where they were. Had it really only been two days ago that she had stood and watched as Phil fell through the unforgiving space to this rocky ledge below? It seemed like a lifetime.

Peter Quill stumbled to Gamora's side, falling to his knees, weeping beside her. May knelt gently beside Phil, brushing his cheek. It was as cold and still as any other corpse she had touched in the morgue, as cold and still as his body was six years ago after Loki and New York.

She looked up at Dr. Strange and Robbie Reyes, who remained apart from the rest, watching intently.

"What now?" she asked.

Strange merely shrugged and May gave an annoyed huff.

"What did the old man say? Something about following your instincts?" Robbie suggested.

May sat back and surveyed the scene, her eyes narrowing at the placement of the two bodies. She motioned Quill back, and gently placed the Soul Stone between Phil and Gamora's hands, covering them with her own.
Maybe...

The Soul Stone glowed, and pulsed briefly beneath them.

A moment passed.

A hand twitched.

A *green* hand.

Gamora sat shakily up, looking around. She met May's eyes, still holding the Stone in Coulson's hand.

"I'm...sorry." Gamora said. "Only one of us...Coulson said only one soul activated the Stone. Only one could come out."

Her eyes filled with tears as Quill embraced her where she sat.

"He said...he said you would understand."

As Gamora reached for Quill to pull herself up, May sat still, looking at her love.

"*No!*"

The rest of them looked over, stunned at May's uncharacteristic outburst.

No, I *don't* understand, Phil!" she cried out. "Why do *you* always have to be the god..damned...bloody *martyr*?"

May bent her head and let her tears fall on Phil's face.

"Why couldn't you let us be happy?" she whispered.

Robbie quickly knelt beside her.

"I need the Stone, May." he asked.

She gazed at him sharply through her tears. Something was...*blazing*...in Robbie's eyes.

"Trust me?" he asked.

May held his gaze for a moment, then turned her hand. The Soul Stone fell into Robbie's palm.

"Thank you, Agent May."

Robbie stood up. He didn't know if he needed to touch Coulson for this. He didn't think so.

It wasn't Coulson he was trying to reach.

He clenched the Stone in his hand and howled a name.

"*Zarathos!*"

---

**Infinity Stone**

Phil Coulson looked over the desolate orange landscape. The only thing he would see now for a
very, very long time, he supposed.

Even Thanos' corpse had vanished when he had shoved Gamora through the light. It had belonged to her, he guessed.

*Good riddance.*

At least he had done that with his life. Saved the world...saved the universe...one last time. It really didn't matter. As long as Melinda was safe, he could be content here.

He would just keep telling himself that.

Phil sighed. He wondered if Mel would forgive him this time. But he had lived his life...Gamora still had hers to live. She didn't make the choice to be here inside the stone. He did.

Gamora had to be the one to go free.

*What would Melinda make of her life?* he wondered. *What about Daisy? The rest?* He guessed that he'd never know.

A tear slipped down his face, unheeded, splashing to the sands below.

Suddenly, a rumble in the back of his mind. One he hadn't felt since...

*No...it couldn't...*

Without warning, it seemed that his entire body had turned to flame, rushing through his veins, filling every pore of him, shooting out of his fingers, toes, hair.

He collapsed to the ground, screaming in unending agony as the fire seemed to consume him.

Finally, the screaming stopped. The man who rose from the ground looked around him at his prison.

With eyes of flame.

**We are...called...Coulson. Make them hear us.**

---

**Vormir**

*Reyes...Robbie...*

Robbie opened his eyes at the familiar whisper in his mind.

"Good to hear you again." he responded kneeling by Coulson's side.

May looked at him sharply.

"Are you..." she started.

Robbie held up a hand to cut her off.

"We had a deal, Rider. I willingly fight your battles for you, and you let SHIELD go."

**It was for Agent Mackenzie, Reyes. Coulson is...different. He made the pact.**

"Yeah, well, I am still willing to abide by the deal. Same reasons. Coulson is as good of a man as
Mack.

That depends on your definition of good.

"The deal was made, demon." Robbie called out desperately. "I didn't turn my back on you."

And I did not leave you willingly. Thanos forced me out, which left me the only foothold that I have in this dimension.

"So...come back."

Silence.

"You said...you said once a Rider, always a Rider. Prove it." Robbie challenged.

Robbie...the Stones erased all trace of me from you. You are...alive. You are free.

"No, not with this debt on my soul. I'll never be free, even if I die tomorrow. Live up to the end of your deal, Rider."

Silence again. Robbie held his breath.

It's not...not the same. For us to leave this place, another must die in his stead. Only then can I change to that host.

Robbie swallowed hard.

"Robbie...he wouldn't want this..." whispered May.

"I know. But I do."

Robbie closed his eyes and took one last breath.

Robbie...NO.... came Coulson's voice.

I'm willing. This is my purpose, Coulson. You have yours. Now. Do it. Robbie thought at the stone.

Do it... came a faint echo

A rush of fire swept through Robbie's body, and he collapsed next to Coulson.

The Soul Stone rolled out of his hand and fell to the ground. It flashed and was gone.

A roll of thunder was heard in the distance.

Phil Coulson's eyes flickered, then opened.

"Oh...oh God...." he groaned, rolling onto his side. "I never...never want to do that again."

Every living thing must at some point.

The Rider's flaming skull turned to face Phil.

"Yeah...but I could wait awhile for the next one."

I hear that that there is a shortage of teachers...
Phil went white.

"No, thanks. Been there, done that."

**I know.**

"You would."

The two men got to their feet, facing each other.

**My deal with you is complete, Phillip Coulson, Director of SHIELD. I have no further claim to you. I make no further claim to you.**

The skull face...smirked?

**I believe my host is in full agreement.**

The flame flickered, and then died out.

"Oh, I am." Robbie confirmed. "At least this way, I can come home every so often without looking over my shoulder for those ladies of yours."

"You gave your life for me..." Coulson started.

Robbie shook his head.

"It wasn't anything that I hadn't given up long ago and made peace with. Besides, the Rider needs me."

Robbie shrugged.

"I meant it when I said it was my purpose. To be the Rider. To claim vengeance when none can be found. And if that means I have to die to do so...well...nothing I haven't done before."

"Still...thank you."

"Phil..."

A whisper behind him. Phil turned to see Melinda May's impassive face looking at his.

"Ma."

**WHAM!**

Phil found himself flat on his back, gazing up at his impossibly beautiful, impossibly **furious** love of his life.

He rubbed his jaw. Still not broken. There was still hope. He got back to his feet carefully.

"May...I..."

"You...you...idiot! You moron! You stupid..bloody..awful...."

Phil couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed Melinda by the waist and pulled her to him. Looking deeply into her eyes, he gave her a moment to send him packing. Then he bent down and kissed her, with everything he had, everything that he was.
And...miracle of miracles...she kissed him back, just as intensely.

When they pulled apart, she glared at him.

"Don't think this get you off the hook."

"Mel..."

"We still haven't fully discussed your making this deal..."

"Mel..."

"And we damn well need to go over your stupid suicidal..."

"I love you."

She stopped.

"We can go over whatever you need to. Talk about whatever happened. Do whatever I need to do to get right with you." Phil said simply. "But...I love you."

She gazed at him for a moment.

"I love you too." she told him.

"Good." interrupted Dr. Strange. "You love him. She loves you. Now...can we go home?"

"Rude." muttered Quill.

Strange's cloak gave a sigh, and cuffed Strange across the back of the head.

"I didn't ask for your opinion." grit out Strange, rubbing his neck.

"Yes." said Phil looking at the group, his arm around Melinda's waist.

As Dr. Strange began to open the portal, Phil frowned and held up his hand.

"Wait."

Strange glared at him.

"Now what?"

Phil met his glare easily.

"You take those two home."

He turned and looked at Robbie.

"Can I ask a favour?"

He looked at Melinda.

"I'd like to choose a different destination."
And welcome back to life Phil Coulson and Gamora! You really didn't think I'd let anyone stay in the Infinity Stone? Anyone who didn't deserve it, that is... ;) And yes, Phil did push Gamora out of the stone first. There was some unshown heated conversation about that...(you can add Gamora to the list of ladies who want to have a 'discussion' with Phil.)

Maybe I should do some outtake chapters... ;-)

We're about to the end of Infinity War, which means to the end of this installment. But some of our heroes are "not yet wed" (Spamalot). We might as well help them out on that journey.

But the course of true love never did run smooth...especially for one couple...

And do I feel something on the back of my neck? Something...wet?
Lovers in a Dangerous Time

Chapter Summary

Death cannot stop true love...it can only delay it a little.

3 of our favourite couples: FitzSimmons, Pepperony and Philinda (of course) are so done with delays.

It’s too bad the universe has other plans for at least one of them.

And a...surprising...character makes his way back into the MCU.

Call it...the Coulson principle... ;-) 

Chapter Notes

"When you're lovers in a dangerous time,
Sometimes you're made to feel as if your love's a crime
Nothing worth having comes without a fight
Gotta kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight..."

~Lovers in a Dangerous Time - Barenaked Ladies/Bruce Cockburn

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wakanda

Leo Fitz quietly slipped into Daisy Johnson's room. Jemma Simmons stood by her bedside, peering intently at her vitals. Her loose hair fell over her shoulders. Fitz supposed she had been working on Daisy's treatments...her hair could come undone after hours bending over the table. He turned to look at his friend.

The young Inhuman lay pale and still in her bed. The bruises from her unchecked Quake Force were fading, and Fitz was glad (a little selfishly, he supposed) that he was so far out of it at the time that he didn't remember them bringing her in. His subconscious filled in the gaps in his dreams, with alarms and cries of "We're losing her!" echoing in the background.

"How is she?" he asked.

Jemma rubbed the back of her neck, but didn't respond.

"Yeah, I guess that's a stupid question." Fitz sighed.

He looked at his lover's back, and swallowed hard. He had envisioned candlelight and roses for this next part...but given everything that had occurred over the last few months...he'd take a little privacy.

"Jemma...I need to ask you something."
Jemma's shoulders tensed, but she said nothing, leaning closer to one of the monitors.

"I don't know how many times we've survived the end of the world, Jems. Ward...Hive...AIDA and the Framework...then the Hole."

Fitz shuddered at the memory.

"Those days in the darkness, with nothing and no one, the only thing that kept me going was the smallest glimmer of hope that I'd find you again. And here we are."

He took a step nearer to her.

"You know, I realized something. The universe can't stop us. 'Cause we've crossed galaxies. We've traveled through dimensions. We've survived the bottom of the Atlantic just so we could be together. A love like that's stronger than any curse."

Jemma remained still, intensely concentrating on the monitor.

"You and I are unstoppable together. And I don't want to live another day without you. We almost didn't get this one."

Fitz looked around, but the space they were in was too narrow. So going down on one knee wasn't an option. He sighed internally. Maybe he should've waited for a better time. But who knows when that would be, and what would come between them next? Besides, he had committed himself, now. Jemma was probably waiting for the question.

"So, Jemma Simmons, will you marry me?"

No response. Huh. He had expected something. He had hoped for a happy gasp or "YES!" or...

Jemma turned around and let out a small scream.

Now, that was more along the lines that Fitz had been thinking of.

"Fitz! You startled me!" gasped Jemma, reaching up and taking out her earbuds.

His face fell. She hadn't heard a word he said. And he had worked so hard on that proposal...

"Are you OK? Your wound...is it..." Jemma asked, a concerned look on her face.

"Fine...yeah...I'm fine."

Jemma relaxed, then pulled herself into his arms. The kiss they shared was like so many others, but, as they clung together, she couldn't help herself thinking. Thanos almost won, and even then, she had nearly lost Fitz to the alien horde. It was sheer luck that they had fought for their lives where they did.

Where would the next fight take place? When would their luck run out?

As the kiss broke and they pulled apart, Jemma decided that she was through with waiting.

"Marry me, Leo Fitz." she demanded. "I don't want to wait for you any longer."

She nearly laughed at the gobsmacked look on Fitz's face. Of course, she thought, he assumed he'd be the one asking.
"I...you..." he stammered. "Of course..."

"Good!" she crowed in delight, and threw herself (gently) back into his arms.

"I always knew I'd be the one to ask," she sighed in contentment, Fitz stroking her hair gently. "I mean, Fitz, what were you waiting for? The end of the world?"

Fitz merely closed his eyes in resignation, pulling her close to him.

He'd show her the camera tapes later.

---

Washington, DC

Pepper Potts leaned back in her cot. The morning's deprogramming session had taken a lot out of her. And both Agent Morse and that Carl Creel fellow had told her they were just beginning.

The worst part of it was that she remembered everything she had been through, she knew everything that she had done. But these sessions were eroding the buffers she had in place between her and what HYDRA had turned her into.

They assured her that the deprogramming wouldn't take very long, maybe a couple of months. The strides the Wakandans had made with James Barnes would speed things up considerably. But she couldn't see how they could cover this up. That the CEO of Stark Industries, the fiancee of Tony Stark himself, had been under the control of HYDRA. If it ever got out, SI stock would tank, just for starters. There would be questions - how did no one (meaning Tony) catch this? Confidence in Iron Man would sink.

And then, the human element. Sure, she had managed to prevent herself from killing James Rhodes. But she had shot the SHIELD Agents. And the cries of the traumatized Inhuman children still haunted her dreams at night. And Tony...surely he must be questioning how much of their love was actually her and how much was at the orders of HYDRA. And...

The door opened.

"This is unacceptable!" snapped Tony Stark, entering the room, Agent Bobbi Morse right behind him.

"Tony..." Pepper started.

"No, really, Ms. Potts....this is substandard accommodation for a Stark Industries senior employee, you of all people should know that!"

Tony paced the small room, Agent Morse leaning against the doorframe. His eyes flit over everything, landing finally on Pepper.

"No still water...no fruit basket...no central heating or AC...and eww..don't get me started on that bed. It looks like something from my MIT dorm room. It probably was...they upgraded the whole complex 10 years ago."

He bent down and pinched the top sheet on the cot, then turned and glared at Bobbi.

"Just what is the thread count on these sheets?"

He moved closer to stand beside Pepper.
"If my country is holding my CEO and my fiancee imprisoned, then I expect her quarters to match a certain lifestyle...am I making myself clear, Agent?" he snarled.

Bobbi looked over at Pepper, who sighed and nodded.

"I'll take him from here, Bobbi."

"Now, that sounds promising..." smirked Tony.

Bobbi shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but I can't leave the two of you alone together. Not at this stage of your treatment. We don't know if she's been tagged to..."

Tony whirled on her.

"Are you suggesting," he asked softly, his tone ice cold, "that I need protection from Ms. Potts? Have you forgotten who I am, Agent Morse?"

"I know exactly who you are, Iron Man," Bobbi responded implacably, "And so did General Hale. We're still disabling triggers in Pepper. We've only just begun."

Tony lifted up his wrist, and Pepper noted the Iron Man bracelet.

"I've done my own reading on Faustus, Agent. I came prepared."

Bobbi hesitated, then nodded.

"I'm right outside the door, Mr. Stark. If you try to break her out..."

"Perish the..." Tony started.

"I'm not going anywhere." Pepper interrupted.

She gave Tony the LOOK.

"I know what's at stake, Bobbi." she continued.

Bobbi nodded again, and walked out of the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Tony huffed a little.

"I feel like I'm in high school." he muttered.

Pepper smiled weakly, as he had intended.

"Maybe not, actually, Howard never cared about..."

"Tony..." said Pepper, breaking his patter.

Tony turned towards her, his intense gaze finally softening.

"You hanging in there, Peps?"

"Yeah..."

The two sat in silence, until Tony hung his head.
"I'm sorry, Pepper. I should have known..."

"There's no way you could have." she consoled him.

"We've been together for over 10 years...and HYDRA was still able to do this. I should have seen something."

"The Hales were good...she was good enough to lie low under Talbot's nose all these years."

"Yeah, well, Talbot couldn't find his ass unless it was handed to him..." Tony grumbled.

"Tony, I need you to listen to me." responded Pepper. "None of this is on you, you hear me? None of it. I was the one who gave HYDRA the opening, I was the one who left. Everything that happened afterwards? That's all on me."

"No, that's all on fucking HYDRA, Pepper."

Pepper got up from the cot, and paced them room.

"I could've fought harder, Tony. Gained an extra few days here or there. Some extra seconds when they told me to do something. Made someone notice that something was wrong. Instead...I folded. Every time I was told to comply...I did it."

She turned away from him, tears in her eyes.

"And I have to live with that." she finished, pulling herself together.

Tony got up and went to her, pulling her close against him, resting on his chest.

"I read everything I could get my hands on about what they did to you." he said quietly. "No one has ever been able to resist that brainwashing. Ever, Pepper Potts. I talked to Morse...when SHIELD fell, Daniel Whitehall got his hands on all of the loyal SHIELD agents HYDRA could capture. Every single one of them turned. And they had infinitely more training in resistance than you did."

He gave a slight laugh.

"You didn't fight it? I think that Rhodey might have a different opinion."

Pepper tensed at the name.

"You were told to shoot him. You had enough presence to push back and take the ICER out of storage rather than your Glock. You saved his life, Pepper. And that Inhuman list you gave to the Hales? We just found it on her desktop. With a timed corruption virus. They wouldn't have been able to use that past the first 24 hours. You were fighting in there, Pepper, way more than anyone else ever did."

Pepper relaxed slightly.

"Loopholes, Tony. You taught me to look for them."

"Because you always had to close them before I used them. You've always been one step ahead of me, Pepper."

Tony let her go, and returned to the bed. Pepper turned around to see her lover steeple his hands, resting his chin on them.
"Pepper...this past year. I played within the Sokavia Accords. I tried so hard to protect the people I cared about."

He grimaced.

"More often than not...I failed. People died, Pepper, good people. In the end, I couldn't even protect you."

Pepper stayed still, letting Tony get it out of his system.

"Then on the other planet...we failed, Peps. Thanos got the Time Stone. We nearly had it...but if he had succeeded...the deaths of the universe would've been on me."

"I think Steve Rogers might have something to say about it." replied Pepper.

Tony gave a small smile.

"Yeah, his crew didn't do too much better, from what I've heard. But still..."

He swallowed hard.

"Some kind of hero I turned out to be in the end."

"You're my hero, Tony Stark." Pepper replied fiercely. "You've spent the past 10 years fighting to do what is right. You've kept us all safe, more often than not. Maybe you've failed once or twice, but you always...always...picked yourself back up and kept going. You've sacrificed so much for this world...for the Avengers...for me."

She sat down beside him and gently lifted his head to meet her eyes.

"Stop trying to take the world on your shoulders alone, Tony."

They sat like that for a few minutes.

"What good is it all, if I don't have you, Pepper?" asked Tony quietly.

Pepper bent her head.

"I meant what I said in my resignation letter." she responded. "If this came out, SI stock would..."

"I don't give a DAMN about SI and CEOs..." Tony snapped. "That's not what I'm talking about."

He blinked.

"And your resignation is NOT accepted, by the way."

He stood up and paced.

"The way I see it, Peps, we're back where when you left, after that mess with Peter Parker. You left me because I still needed to help...I needed to be Iron Man."

He turned around and spread his hands helplessly.

"I still do, Pepper. I can't sit on the sidelines anymore...that didn't work. And we've now got an entire galaxy to worry about and prepare for. The team, they've got ideas to put something together. But if it's going to work...they're gonna need me...gonna need Iron Man. And you...you made it quite clear,
Pepper. That you couldn't do this anymore."

He looked her in the eyes, his own suspiciously bright.

"I can't imagine my life without you in it."

Pepper was quiet for a moment.

"Tony...being trapped in your head for so long...gives you time to think."

Tony huffed in amusement.

"I was wrong...back then. I can't expect you to give up the suit. That's part of who you are. And I can't expect you to sit by and do nothing when you are very clearly needed...that's not fair to you."

"But can you watch me do it, Pepper? Can you patch me up at the end of the day? Can you do this...knowing I might not come home one day?"

Pepper looked Tony in the eyes.

"I'll always support you, Tony. And there's always a chance, for each one of us, every day, that we might not make it home. Whether it's because you're Iron Man...or whether you get into a car crash...either is as likely."

"Don't let Happy hear you say that."

"When HYDRA had me...all those months...they only gave me a little time to sleep. But every time I drifted off, Tony...I dreamt of you. I still do."

She gave a little shrug.

"It's always you."

Tony looked at her, his gaze unreadable. Then, he took two strides, and knelt in front of her.

"Then, let's do this right this time."

He met and held her eyes.

"Ms. Virginia Potts...Pepper...will you do me the utmost honour...of becoming my wife?"

She was quiet.

"I mean..." Tony began to ramble..."I can understand it if you say no...who in their right mind would take me and all this baggage..."

"Tony..." Pepper cut him off, "What happens when they find out? That Tony Stark married a HYDRA stooge?"

"Then, Ms. Potts," Tony said seriously, "I'll do for you what you have always done for me. I'll stand by you. And we'll face it together."

He thought for a moment.

"And then I will buy out the media company of whoever reported it and personally fire their asses. Drop them in the mid-Atlantic somewhere."
As Pepper began to laugh, Tony continued, "Seriously, Pepper, you know I would..."

"I know...I know."

"Marry me, Pepper." Tony repeated. "Please."

Pepper smiled.

"Yes. Yes, Mr. Stark. I'll marry you."

As the two reached for each other, there was some loud sniffling behind the door.

Tony lifted his hand, and the door opened further.

Bobbi and Lance Hunter fell into the room, Hunter's face streaked with tears.

Bobbi shrugged from the floor.

"What can I say? He's sentimental like that..."

---

**Tahiti**

Phil Coulson stepped out of his cottage into the bright Tahitian sunlight, and slipped on his sunglasses. He wiggled his toes in the warm sand as he gazed out over the clear blue water.

It couldn't get better than this.

The door shut behind him, and Melinda May quietly came up beside him, taking his hand and interlacing their fingers.

Yes, yes, it could get better than this.

The two made their way down to the oceanfront, enjoying the sounds of the waves lapping on the shore.

"You **REALLY** want to go parasailing?" asked May, not looking at him.

Phil nodded, pulling her closer.

"Maybe let me set it up," she suggested, squeezing his hand. "You gave the front desk a bit of a start when you tried to book us into our room."

"You'd thought they heard a ghost..." agreed Phil. "Sounds like my field work days are over...the entire universe heard me come out of the shadows."

May shook her head.

"Get Fitz to install a voice modifier in that arm of yours...a few years when this has all faded...you'll be fine again."

"Mmm..."

"Of course," continued May, not looking at him, "there are...other...ways to parasail."

Phil carefully kept his face still, although a trace of a smirk showed in the corners of his lips.
"Are there, Agent May?"

"Mmm hmm..."

"Would you care to enlighten me?"

"In a moment."

As the two stood watching the waves, there was a slight crunch behind them. Before they could do more than register the sound, something cold and wet touched their entwined hands.

"What the..."

The world blurred around them...and the scene in front of them changed. It was still oceanfront, but the shore beneath their feet was slightly rockier, the ocean not quite as blue, more clouds in the sky.

The two Agents whirled around to see a very large...dog... bound out of reach, his long tongue panting. He gave them a sheepish doggie grin.

"What is that?" gasped Phil.

"LOCKJAW!" yelled May, pelting after the dog, who was now heading for a softer patch of land.

"You know him?" asked Phil, tearing after her.

"I do..." snarled May, "And he'll be dog food when I get my hands on him...."

"Not a good idea, Agent May."

The ground beneath their feet turned cold and slippery.

"OOPH!"

Phil stumbled and fell into Melinda May, sending the pair of them to ground. The two slid harmlessly to where Lockjaw sat, panting happily. He met May's angry gaze and cowered back a little. He whimpered and looked up at the woman who appeared beside him.

"It's OK..." she reassured him. "I won't let anything happen to you."

As Phil and May got to their feet, she looked them over imperiously. Two other figures approached them, hooded from sight.

"Director Phil Coulson? I am Crystal, kin to the King of the Inhumans. We need to talk."

Phil put on his blandest face.

"Sorry, but I don't talk to kidnappers. Send us back to Tahiti, then come find me when I set up office hours."

Crystal's face paled, and Lockjaw nuzzled into her side.

"YOU!"

May smirked.

"Here we go again..."
Crystal pulled herself together.

"The Holder foretold..." she murmured to the shorter figure, who snorted.

"The Council is going to LOVE this..." it responded.

Crystal looked back at the Agents.

"I..." she swallowed hard, "apologize...for the manner in which we brought you here. But we must talk, and quickly. We stand at the centre of great changes, and we must all stand together or...

"Been there, done that." sighed Phil. "Look, we just want a few days on the beach, back in Tahiti. Then I can deal with the end of the world. Again."

May nodded, and took a defensive stance to Phil's side.

"Would you rather face her brother in law on heresy charges?" snarked the smaller figure. "There are those seeking you out now, Director Coulson."

"I think we can deal with another group of Inhumans." snarled May in return. "Especially with the Avengers back together."

Crystal looked at the third figure. It took a step forward.

"You owe me one, Director." a vaguely familiar voice replied. "I'm calling it in."

He moved his hood back, revealing his face.

Phil's jaw dropped, and he heard May gasp in surprise.

"You..." he whispered.

"Me."

Lincoln Campbell gazed soberly at the pair.

"Everything has a price, SHIELD. Even the lives of half the Universe."

Phil nodded in shock.

"Where?"

Lincoln smiled.

"Lockjaw?" he called.

The dog padded forward. He gently licked Phil's hand, keeping as far away from May as possible.

The Inhumans and Agents placed their hands on Lockjaw. A shimmer and smell of burnt ozone...

The waves continued to lap on an empty shore, washing away any evidence that anyone had ever been there to begin with.

Chapter End Notes
Woah. But he...err...Fallen Agent? Yeah...but did you see the body? Even if the ship is blown up...we'd better see that body or else...

(Hive is still dead...remember that Bobbi Morse said something about 'dead evil gods' after she and Lance met up with Crystal previously.)

And so, we have finished up Infinity War. Everyone is together again, and one can assume that Steve, Tony, and Maria will be moving forward with whatever plans they have to replace Sokavia now that they have Phil back. Wedding bells are chiming...all is right with the world...

But I wonder just what could worry the Inhumans to the point that they are reaching out? I mean...where were they in Wakanda?

And what is Phil the holder of that can make Inhuman royalty stutter and apologize?

Next up...welllll...it is an Agents of SHIELD fic after all. Let me see if I can go borrow Clark Gregg and his dulcet tones ;-)  

P.S. Sections of this chapter were taken from Agents of SHIELD S5x06, “Fun and Games.” as well as referencing S5x22, “The End”. And I snuck a little Avengers:Endgame trailer in here. All credit to the writers, cast and crew respectively.
Manhattan

New Yorkers are used to pretty much anything. Alien invasions, supervillians running amok through Times Square, Spiderkid swinging through the skyscrapers.

So a brief patch of mist, and several people stumbling onto the sidewalk earned nothing more than some irritated glances and mutters to 'watch where they were going'.

The four instinctively formed a circle around a couple of smaller children.

The oldest man looked over at a younger blond woman.

"This looks like home...but...can you scout for a moment?"

She nodded and disappeared.

"Mommy..." the younger boy wailed.

"She'll be back in a second," a younger man consoled him. He looked over at the leader.

"Want me to head up high?" he asked.

"You really want to draw attention to ourselves?" the stocky man grumbled at him.

"Everyone, stay put until she gets back." the leader ordered.

The blond woman reappeared.

"This seems to be New York," she reported, "but there are some differences."

"Enough that we need to find Strange?" he asked.

"I think so. I hope he's still there." she responded, scooping up the boy that had wailed for her.

She cuddled him close.

"At least we're together."

The stocky man swept up the girl, and nodded at the group.

"Well, lead on...."

As they walked through the streets, they garnered some curious glances, but nothing more. This was
New York...nothing phased its citizens. Not even strange voices in their head...although that had been a little unsettling.

They rounded a corner and found a group of young men blocking their path.

"Y'all lost?" sneered one.

"No, we know where we're going." the leader replied politely.

The group looked at each other and snickered, fanning out.

The woman sighed.

"You really don't want to do this." she tried.

Another smirked.

"Tell you what, lady, hand over your wallets, and we let you continue down the street. You don't..."

A switchblade appeared in his hand. Similar weapons appeared in the other muggers hands.

The group looked at each other.

"Can I..." the younger man asked. "Please, I wanna..."

The leader shook his head.

"No...we stay under the radar until we can get to Strange and find out what is going on."

He reached out and took the girl from her carrier.

"Keep it as quiet as you can, please."

"Really? Him quiet?" the younger man sighed.

The stocky man smirked back and tossed his coat to the teen. He turned to face the gang, all of whom had stepped back, an uncertain look on their faces.

"It's Clobberin' Time!" exclaimed Ben Grimm, and started forward.

Chapter End Notes

**HEY!** Where did you guys come from? This is an MCU story, you have your own universe...

**That's right! Didn't Disney buy us up?**

Wade...

**Hurray! We get to be in the story too!**

No...Wade...you get back where you belong...
Wade?

Oh boy.

OK...now seriously ;-)  

That closes off the Infinity Knot. Thank you all for coming along with me on this journey, and for all the comments and kudos along the way. All of you rock!

Going forward, since Thanos was ultimately defeated, and we are still awaiting the events in the MCU in 2019, this series will start drifting farther from established canon. I learned my lesson from Black Panther, and will try to leave wiggle room to include whatever happens in Captain Marvel (March) and maybe even Spiderman: Far From Home (July)...but we'll see where the MCU goes with Phase 4. It'll be interesting. Since I have no clue for Agents of SHIELD S6 (also July), that'll be decided when it starts to air.

(I am very suspicious of the MCU and its track record regarding female heroes. Should Carol Danvers be among the dusted by the end of the post-credits scene(s), we'll be ignoring that. Now, if Coulson or Fury are secretly Skrulls, on the other hand...)  

I'm hoping to start Part Three of this series, tentatively titled "Twist Ties" (say that 5 times fast) relatively soon. It will look at the lay of the land in the MCU in a post "victorious" Battle of Wakanda - sometimes winning has its own share of issues. It will also deal with a few loose strings from Agents of SHIELD (yes, Phil's in trouble again...this time, it's over something he had nothing to do with.) In addition, the Disney-Fox merger poses some very real problems for several of our characters, which probably won't come into play until Phases 5-6 in the real world.

(Oh, and @Disney_Freak, I haven't forgotten you. Let's just say that our time travelers _may_ be making an appearance...but I don't guarantee who's side they're on... ;-))  

So, in the words of the illustrious Stan Lee...'Til next time, true believers! :-)