Old Souls

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Collections: ellie marvel fics - read, Iron Man, Works worth reading a million times over


Old Souls

by the_writer1988

Summary
Tony Stark dies October 17th 2023.

And wakes up on the 30th April 2016, three days before Lagos.

Three days before the breaking of the Avengers begins.

But now he has a chance.

A chance to do it all over again.

And not die trying.

COMPLETE!

Notes

My new story! Had a burst of inspiration for this and had to write it. Buckle up folks, its gonna be a long one!

See the end of the work for more notes
Prologue

PROLOGUE

17th October 2023

“We’re gonna be okay.”

Pepper’s voice was fading in his ears. Her face was diminishing in his vision as blackness crawled at the edges of his eyes. He felt so weak, so in pain… His whole body was feeling numb. His heart was slowing and he found it difficult to keep on taking the small breaths he could. He’d made sure everyone was safe…

He’d won.

His breathing was slowing.

All he could see now was Pepper’s smile as he turned his head to the side weakly, allowing gravity to take his body.

“You can rest now.” He barely heard her voice.

His vision vanished and he ceased seeing Pepper’s face in his mind’s eye as he felt himself fade into blackness.

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Tony rolled over and yawned as consciousness slowly began to drag him out of the realm of sleep. As he opened his eyes, he found himself in familiar surroundings. He was in a room, his bedroom, lying in his bed in the Compound that had just recently been destroyed by Thanos…

That name resonated with him.

Thanos.

He’d been fighting him, hadn’t he?

Or had he dreamed it?

It all felt so real.

Memories flashed in his mind’s eye as Tony sat up in bed, pushing the covers off and looking down at his right arm. His arm was fine. There was no evidence of injury. He’d felt his arm burning, the bones crumbling to dust in his arm as he held the power of the Infinity Stones as they coursed through his body. No dream could make him feel that type of sensation…

Pepper’s face flashed in his mind.

“We’re gonna be okay. You can rest now.”

Those words had felt so real, so final…

Her face fading from his mind… He’d died. He was sure of it.
Then where was he?

Was he in heaven?

Surely Tony Stark wouldn’t be sent to heaven?

Tony slowly got out of bed and walked across to the en-suite bathroom, glanced in the mirror and stumbled back in shock.

Forcing himself to look again, he reached up and touched the right side of his face, turning his head this way and that, looking for the signs of aging and for the scars he felt for sure should be there, yet he looked exactly how he had in 2016. He had small tufts of grey hair at the sides.

He remembered Pepper kneeling in front of him, struggling to keep smiling as she uttered the last words he’d ever hear. That couldn’t have been a dream.

“Where am I?” he whispered, touching his face once again, afraid the illusion would break.

Moving out of the bathroom, Tony walked across to the other side of the room, opening the curtains and looked out. The Compound was bustling with activity as employees of both Stark Industries and the Avengers went about their working day. It was a sunny day with the sun beating down upon the land.

Stumbling back, Tony felt the beginnings of a panic attack. He could feel his heart pumping faster in his chest. If he could feel his heart beating he had to be alive, right? Surely?

*Stay cool, Stark. Clearly, something happened when you used the stones.*

He knew it had happened. The memories felt too real. He could recall Morgan, his daughter, giving him a long hug before he had departed for the Compound. He remembered holding her as a baby. If it had been a dream, everything he remembered wouldn’t feel so real and he’d have had to sleep for years to be able to fit it all in…

“Oh god, Morgan! Is she-?”

He needed to find out where he was. Did Morgan even exist?

How could he find out?

Tony pressed his hand to his chest, just to make sure his heart was beating.

It was.

“Are you alright, boss? I detect your heartbeat rising suggesting you are succumbing to a panic attack.”

Tony jumped, stumbling back against the wall, sliding down it. His A.I was here. He knew he should be dead. He’d died. He’d felt it. But he was here… It felt real. Was it real? It had to be…

“I shouldn’t be here…” he muttered, casting his gaze around him. He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. He needed to know where he was. Judging by his appearance he had to be in the past…

“Friday?” he managed.

“Yes, boss,” the A.I responded.
“What is today’s date?”

“The thirtieth of April 2016.”

To be continued...
Chapter One: The Purpose

Chapter Summary

Tony acclimatises to his new situation and gets stuck in, in changing things.

Chapter Notes

Oh, wow, thank you for the positive feedback for the first chapter! I honestly was not expecting it! I hope I do not disappoint any of you with what I have planned!

Please, do enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER ONE: The Purpose

30th April 2016

Tony didn’t react straight away to the date. He swallowed, his mouth feeling dry. “Friday, can you repeat the date?” He’d heard correctly, right?

“The thirtieth of April 2016. Are you feeling alright, boss?”

Tony numbly got to his feet, casting his gaze around. “I’m fine,” he answered, not wanting to raise suspicions. He’d clearly died. He remembered it. It was too visual in his head for it to have been just a dream. So that meant… somehow… and he didn’t know how, he’d ended up in the past, specifically just before…

Something gnawed at him. What was so specific about this date that he’d woken up here? What had he been doing in April 2016? Rubbing his eyes, Tony groaned. “This is a mess.”

He couldn’t tell anyone about this; they’d believe him crazy. But why had he been sent here? Was this a form of hell where he had to relive everything?

“But then…” he muttered quietly, “if I was being forced to live through everything again, why would I have control of my own body?” If this was some sort of punishment for his sins Tony doubted he’d have any control of his body. The fact that he did, suggested that his theory he was in some special sort of hell was clearly wrong, which he was rather glad about.

Glancing around the room, Tony noticed a few leaflets on the dresser and moved to study them, finding them all leaflets on MIT. And then he remembered. A few days from now he would be attending MIT, where he would use newly developed technology from his Research and Development team at Stark Industries, to trial run a potential new device which could aid the recovery of hundreds of people during therapy.

It was an event Tony and Pepper were due at… Wait.
“Shit.” Tony swore, already realising right now he and Pepper were on a break. He couldn’t simply return to Pepper. Currently, their relationship was dead in the water.

*Morgan*...

His daughter’s face swam into his mind’s eye. Morgan was the one thing he loved more than Pepper. And right now her very existence was under threat. She might not ever be born, or if she was, she wouldn’t be his Morgan. The Morgan he knew was gone forever.

*September sixteenth, 2018. 11:20pm.*

Tony started.

“What?”

*September sixteenth 2018. 11:20pm.*

It wasn’t even a whisper. The words just appeared in his head, ingraining themselves into his mind.

It worked out. Morgan had been born in June 2019. Why had the date, and presumably the time of Morgan’s conception, suddenly appeared in his head as if he had always known it? He remembered they’d married shortly before that date.

*I’d built the cabin before we married. It was my wedding gift to Pepper.*

They’d decided to live their lives in the new world they had found themselves in following the Snap. They couldn’t put their lives on hold anymore. Pepper had reduced her duties at *Stark Industries* so she could enjoy married life with Tony as much as possible. They’d started trying for a child soon after their wedding... Morgan had come along quite quickly, surprising them both as they had expected problems due to their respective ages.

But Pepper had fallen for Morgan quite quickly.

Now Tony was in a time where he and Pepper were on a break.

*I want my little girl.*

*September sixteenth, 2018. 11:20pm.*

The words reverberated throughout his brain again. He tried to ignore them.

But why had he been sent back here? What was he supposed to do? What was his purpose in being here?

*Fix things.*

The words appeared in his brain, not knowing where they had come from.

“Ok,” he said aloud, “can whoever is putting stuff in my head, please stop doing that?”

All was silent. It was unnerving.

This day was getting odder and odder.

First, he’d died, then the next he was waking up in 2016, seven years before he died.
Tony took in deep breaths.

_Think, Stark, think!_

“The day I was at MIT was the day of what?” Tony wracked his memory. There was something significant about being sent back to this specific point. Something he could change, if it was the way to fix things.

“Friday, has there been any intelligence reports delivered recently which the Avengers are acting upon?” The quicker way to find an answer was to ask his A.I. Friday was installed within the Compound. She’d be able to determine if they were preparing for a mission or not.

“Intel has been received regarding a possible attack to steal a weapon in Lagos, Nigeria. The suspects include a one, Brock Rumlow, an international terrorist currently wanted across the world for several known attacks,” explained Friday. “Would you like me to send you the full intel, boss?”

Tony shook his head. “No.” He now knew what he could stop, or rather change.

It was the disaster in Lagos which had accelerated the Accords. Tony could potentially prevent the disaster from unfolding, allowing innocent lives that were originally lost to live.

“I’m not even supposed to be here…” he muttered quietly. He was trying to remember where he should have been. “Friday, when did I get here?”

“Last night, boss. You arrived after everyone had gone to bed. However, you have agreed to hold a speech at M.I.T on the third of May.”

“Right…” Tony chewed his bottom lip, thinking. “Do we have a date when Rogers will act on the intel on Rumlow?”

“The intelligence suggests the date of attack will be the same day as your M.I.T speech, boss.”

He’d have to postpone the M.I.T speech. He had to be in Lagos, otherwise what was the point in sending him back to this point in time if he wasn’t going to be there to prevent a wider catastrophe?

“Friday, send my apologies to the Director of M.I.T that due to unfortunate circumstances I will have to delay my appearance for a few weeks but notify them I will be contributing a large donation to the faculty and the students.”

“Yes, boss.”

That was one thing dealt with.

The next was to get himself involved with the Lagos mission.

_And, technically, I’m not even part of the Avenger’s rota anymore. And I need to fix things with Pepper._

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Tony showered first, taking the time to inspect his body, noticing the scars he’d received during his fight on Titan did not mar this body. _It’s because that hasn’t happened yet, idiot!_ Tony kept glancing at his right arm. This arm had held all six Infinity Stones, had wielded them to ensure Thanos’ ultimate destruction, and yet it looked fine.

A part of him was still trying to comprehend the situation he had fallen into, how he could go
about altering things so they did not follow the same path. Was he in an alternate timeline or was he in the timeline he’d died in? Tony didn’t know, yet he had the feeling the rules of time travel did not apply in this case. Why be sent back if he was just going to create an alternate reality with his actions?

“But I also know where all the Infinity Stones now are,” he muttered. “I could collect them before Thanos does…” It was a thought he’d have to wait to consider. First, his biggest priority was ensuring the team didn’t split. The Avengers needed to be whole if they were going to counter Thanos.

Tony dressed in a suit and went for a walk around the Compound. It was business as usual as Stark Industries also had a few floors to themselves for research and development. In fact, once Tony and Pepper had got back together, Pepper had moved the majority of her work to this base so she could spend more time with Tony as he negotiated the Accords and worked in tandem with the one hundred and seventeen countries that had supported them. But right now, Pepper was on the other side of America, working out of Malibu.

It was part of a way for them to maintain their distance from one another as they took a break.

Tony swallowed, remembering how hard he had taken their break-up the first time. He wanted to fix things with her now but Pepper needed the space. She needed to see he was trying to reign in his compulsiveness to be Iron Man. The Accords had helped with that… and what Steve had done to Tony in Siberia had brought her back…

Steve.

_The Winter Soldier. Zemo._

“Shit.” It wasn’t just the Accords Tony had to consider this time around. It was the wider problem that had split the Avengers further.

The framing of the Winter Soldier.

The death of Wakanda’s King.

He stopped in his walk around the Compound, moved to the window and pulled out his phone. “Friday,” he instructed quietly, “can you begin a world-wide search for Bucky Barnes?” He already knew where he was but he needed the evidence if he was going to exonerate Bucky from suspicion if, in the event, Tony was unable to prevent Zemo from attacking the signing of the Accords. “Tag him, and record his every movement. And begin a secondary search for a man of Sokovian birth called Helmut Zemo. Tag him too and let me know if he drops off your radar.”

“Yes, boss,” she replied.

“And,” as if it was an afterthought, “find and locate Stephen Strange. Again, keep tabs on him.”

He needed to know where Strange was. He didn’t want to be surprised like last time.

_He knew I was going to die. That’s why he spared me._ That realisation had struck Tony on the battlefield when he had seen the wizard raise his finger towards him. Just one way to win, and it had all hinged upon Tony’s willingness to sacrifice his own life.

_But did he see this? Did he know I’d be sent back?_

It didn’t matter if Strange had known, only that Tony had acted when no one else could.
God, he wanted to see her again, but right now, she didn’t exist. It was impossible to see her. All he had was the memories he’d made of her in the last four years of his life.

He made his way towards the conference room where he hoped to find the Avengers in a planning session for their mission to Lagos. Tony smiled and acknowledged everyone he passed, noting that they seemed pleased to see him.

Feeling a bit of nerves bundled in his stomach, Tony pressed open the door of the conference room and walked inside.

Steve, Natasha, Sam, and Wanda sat around a table filled with maps and diagrams and photos, discussing how best to stop Rumlow’s attack. They all looked up as he entered. Surprise flickered across Steve’s face and Natasha’s eyes widened. Wanda looked indifferent and Sam raised his eyebrows.

“What? Didn’t know I was in town?”

“It’s good to see you, Tony, but as you can see we –” began Steve.

Tony cut him off. “I’m here to help.”

“You have an M.I.T speech scheduled,” said Natasha quietly.

Tony turned his attention towards her, noting the suspicions in her eyes. “I didn’t know you had a personal interest in my schedule. Do you keep tabs on me, Agent Romanoff?”

Her lips twitched but she didn’t reply, just kept watching him which he found a little unnerving.

“Do you want to join the Avengers again?” asked Steve, casting his gaze around the table.

“I never really was an Avenger… Just a consultant. Friday clued me in on the intelligence you received and I thought you might want an extra hand?” He wasn’t going to push his way into the mission. If Steve didn’t want him there then he wouldn’t be part of the mission but it wouldn’t stop him from going to Lagos and preventing the catastrophe that was sure to come if he wasn’t there.

“To be honest…” Steve hesitated, “… it would be great to have you with us, but I think the Iron Man armour would stand out.”

Tony had expected this. He could easily develop the nano-technology. He knew how to do it. “I have some new tech which only needs to be deployed into a suit when it is needed. I can be undercover as much as the rest of you.”

Steve nodded. “If that’s the case then… great, take a seat. We’re still going over the bare basics of the mission.”

Pulling out a chair next to Sam, Tony sat.

He didn’t fail to notice Nat’s continuing glances at him or the suspicious frown she wore whenever they made eye contact. Tony shook off the feeling and got to work.

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“Have we accounted for Rumlow wearing a suicide vest and attempting to take out as many of us as possible?” asked Tony. They’d planned most of the mission. Wanda and Nat would be
undercover in the main square, watching for any suspicious activity. Sam would be on a roof whilst Tony and Steve would be in opposite buildings and watching the street from above.

“He’s not gonna be wearing one, Tony,” answered Steve. “Rumlow wants to cause as much destruction as possible. Killing himself is against his character.”

“If he was to detonate in the middle of a crowd…” Tony pointed out. “Mass casualties. Can we take the risk?”

“Stark has a point,” pointed out Sam. “We cannot blindly assume he won’t wear a suicide vest. What if he does and innocent people are killed in the blast? We need to plan for this eventuality. We cannot sweep it to the side.”

Steve frowned, leaning forward. “If he does wear one, he will look to cause maximum damage to the market. We’ll need to prevent him from making it that far.”

Tony folded his arms across his chest. “Then we need to keep this to inside the building he is targeting and neutralise him before he can escape. I think it is better off I am stationed inside the building they are targeting.”

“What if he’s not going to hit the Institute for Infectious Diseases?” asked Natasha. Tony had already raised the point of Rumlow’s possible target was the Institute rather than the local police station located close by. “There are several targets he could be after. This could all be a ploy to lure us there.”

“It isn’t. The intel is solid, you said it yourself,” noted Tony.

“The intel only states he’s after a weapon,” said Wanda. “There is no solid proof of what building he is going for.”

“I know it’s going to be the Institute for Infectious Diseases.” Tony knew he was bold in saying this. “He’s after a weapon. The worst weapon Rumlow could go after is a biological one which would cause maximum damage if unleashed upon the general public. His only logical target is the Institute.”

Steve still looked unconvinced. “In other countries, he’s been in, he’s attacked the local police stations and there is one close to the Institute. He could easily steal weapons from there.”

“I think Tony is right,” said Natasha suddenly. “Logic dictates he’ll be after the biological weapon. He already has enough weapons, why add more of the same when you can obtain something different and far more destructive? If Tony is wrong, there is no harm in him being inside the Institute, is there? He can still join whatever skirmish we get into if Rumlow’s target isn’t the Institute.”

Steve acknowledged Natasha’s point. “Ok, Tony, change your starting position to inside the Institute but stay on comms. If we need you, we’ll call you.”

“Sure,” shrugged Tony. His main priority was to ensure Rumlow didn’t leave the building with the biological weapon. If he succeeded he’d save countless of lives. And he’d spare Wanda the indignation of being put on house arrest for her unintentional mistake. If it did come to it and Wanda still did make a mistake which injured and killed people, Tony would talk to her directly, instead of sending Vision as a messenger.

Steve poured over the maps. “Can anyone think of anything else?”
“We need to notify the Nigerian government about this intelligence,” advised Tony. “Otherwise we will be entering a country illegally.”

“That hasn’t mattered before,” declared Steve. “We’re the Avengers. We are helping people. The more people who know of this intelligence the easier it is for someone to betray us. We cannot trust any government to let us do our jobs properly.”

Tony sighed. Of course, Steve would see it that way. “Things change. The Sokovia incident has caused ramifications throughout the political world. People are demanding for something to be done to keep us in check.”

“What are you saying?” enquired Wanda hesitantly.

Tony sighed. It was better to have this conversation now rather than later. He should have warned them before about the Accords but he’d assumed Steve would have kept up to date with all the developments of the world. He hadn’t expected Steve, or any other member of the team to know nothing about the Accords when Tony had brought Ross to them to discuss the implementation of them.

“I’m saying we cannot simply go to another country without permission and act within their borders without notifying the correct people. There is legislation being drawn up which will affect how we work as a team. We will have to answer to a panel of people if things go wrong, submit reports of our missions, work with the panel if places do not wish for our help. The Accords are good and bad. They’ll be coming in regardless of what you think, Steve. It’s better to work with them than to become a fugitive and being unable to help people without becoming a hunted man yourself.”

“Tony has a point, Steve,” agreed Natasha, leaning across the desk. “It’s worth notifying the Nigerian Government. If something doesn’t go to plan –” she glanced at Tony, “we’ve covered ourselves, right?”

Tony nodded emphatically. “Any fallout will not be so bad because we will have had permission to be there.”

“What if they say no? I’m not going to let some official dictate how I go about saving the world.”

“Wow, Steve, wow.” Tony had forgotten how Steve could be stubborn. “Look, I know you find it hard to trust the government after Hydra infiltrated SHIELD but do not make yourself a criminal. How can you help people if you are constantly on the run? We need to stay a team and if that means taking the bad with the good, then we should. The Accords will become law, whether you like it or not.”

“Tony, you’re respected. Can you make the call?” Natasha eyed him directly.

“Sure.” Tony figured he would be the best one to do so. Steve didn’t have the diplomacy skills Tony had learned over the years.

Wanda frowned. “But why would they listen to Stark? He’s not respected… He’s hated.”

Tony wanted to laugh. “I’m not hated. I may have been for a while after Ultron, especially after the first few months, but I’ve shown I am willing to atone for my mistakes. 75% of the relief aid for Sokovia comes from my own pocket. It’s because of Sokovia and what happened there is why I am willing to work with the governments on the Accords. They should have the right to refuse our help, especially when it isn’t world-ending scenarios.” He narrowed his eyes, scrutinising Wanda.
“Don’t forget I’ve kept your part in Ultron quiet.” He placed his hands together and cast his eyes around the room. “Look, the Accords are something we can discuss after Lagos, but I do believe it would be in our best interest to inform the Nigerian government of the threat. And, they may give us extra help to capture Rumlow.”

“More people the better, Steve,” intoned Nat as Steve reluctantly nodded.

Tony smiled at her.

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For the next two days and nights, Tony worked hard to replicate his nano-technology. He hadn’t invented it until the beginning of 2018, just before Thanos arrived, but there was no reason why he couldn’t establish the suit now. He’d already started the bare basics of it.

He needed a portable device to carry around with, one that could be easily hidden and activated at a moment’s notice.

With the new Arc Reactor ready, Tony attached it to his chest, with little nanonites clinging to his skin to hold it in place. They didn’t hurt, he barely felt it.

Smiling steadily, he slipped out of his lab. He needed to prepare for the mission.

They’d be leaving in a few hours.

**To be continued...**

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Tony's main motivations at the moment are keeping the Avengers together and getting back with Pepper as at the start of Civil War they were on a break. He's decided to go with the flow and get stuck in. Of course, Tony seems to know certain things when he shouldn't... such as he has to fix things and when he and Pepper conceived Morgan because even if they have a child, there is no guarantee it is going to be the same Morgan, right? because the circumstances have to be at the right time.

Next up: Lagos Mission...

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Two: Lagos

Chapter Summary

The team travels to Lagos to prevent Rumlow's attack.

Chapter Notes

Hello all,

Here is the next chapter... which covers Lagos. I was expecting it to be a bit longer but it didn't work out that way. The next chapter will be longer! Thank you for all the comments so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWO: Lagos

3rd May 2016

Lagos, Nigeria

It was an overnight flight to Nigeria. The team had gained permission from the Nigerian government to carry out their mission in Lagos, providing they liaised with the military which Tony was very happy to oblige by, despite Steve’s continued concerns. As Steve was in charge of the mission, it was his duty to co-ordinate with the Nigerian military team which was being sent to join them.

As the Quin-Jet began its descent into Nigerian airspace, Tony couldn’t help but glance at Natasha, who sat in the pilot’s seat. He hadn’t had a chance to really study her since everything was happening so fast. Tony had needed to integrate himself into the Lagos mission and he hadn’t had much time to do it. He’d thrown himself into his new situation.

Now he had a bit of relative quiet he couldn’t help but keep glancing towards Natasha. The last words he’d ever heard from Nat were: “See you in a minute”. Those had turned out to be the last words she would ever say to the team before her death. Before her act of self-sacrifice to ensure they gained the soul stone.

_But if gaining the soul stone requires losing someone you love, how can I obtain it without doing so?_

He shook his head. The dilemma of Vormir would have to be solved some other time. But he would make sure Nat’s fate would be changed.

Sadness welled up, tightening his chest. He hadn’t been shocked to see Nat when he’d gone to their planning session because he’d already known she was still alive in this time. It had been hard to see her, knowing of the fate which awaited her. A few years ago no one would have thought Natasha
would sacrifice her life, but then, Tony mused, no one would have believed it possible for him either. Steve had once made it clear to him; Tony would never do something so heroic. Hours later he had proved Steve wrong.

Truthfully, Tony had been lying down on the wire for years now. So many times he had stared death in the face and had survived. Only this time death had caught up with him and somehow he’d miraculously been sent back to 2016 with vague instructions to ‘fix it’, whatever that meant!

*I’ll change it. I’ll change it so Nat does not have to die.* It was a vow he intended to keep.

Right now, he needed to focus on ensuring the damage to Lagos did not occur again. As long as he played his part Wanda shouldn’t have any need to contain a suicide bomb.

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They landed at a military base and were then driven into Lagos where they discussed their plan with the military chiefs before they moved to their predetermined positions. Tony was escorted into the Institute where he then helped to remove the biological weapon, preventing Rumlow from getting his hands on it in the first place. Any other materials that could be used to create a biological weapon were also removed to reduce the risk of any being stolen.

Tony crouched low on the third floor, hidden behind the wall of the next room, eyes ready to track anyone who entered the room. He wasn’t wearing his suit yet, he didn’t need to.

“Any movement?” Tony asked into his earpiece. He wasn’t sure on the timings of the attack. They just knew he would strike at some point today.

“*Nothing I can see,*” replied Steve. “*Everywhere looks quiet. Nat, Wanda and Sam are all in position.*”

“Good.” Momentarily he switched off his comm-channel, twisting his watch, which was made of nano-tech, to Friday’s frequency. She was monitoring the Lagos situation herself in a remote-controlled Iron Man suit, patrolling from the air, hidden by the clouds moving above the city.

“What do you see, Friday?”

“Nothing suspicious, boss. Everyone is in place.”

“I’ll have to keep you on silent but as soon as you detect something abnormal, alert me. I’ll see the red light on my watch.”

“Yes, boss,” Friday acknowledged.

Tuning back to the team’s frequency he overheard Wanda say: “*You guys know I can move things with my mind, right?*”

“*Looking over your shoulder needs to become second nature,*” Nat replied.

“*Anybody ever tell you, you’re a little paranoid?*” Sam interjected.

“*Not to my face, why? Did you hear something?*” Nat was quick on the response.

“*Eyes on target, folks. Best lead we’ve had on Rumlow in six months and I don’t wanna lose him.*”

Sam snorted. “*If he sees us coming, that won’t be a problem. He kinda hates us.*”

From Tony’s research, he knew Rumlow had a personal vendetta against Steve and the others. He
was also intent on causing as much damage as possible in his previous attacks, probably in the hope of drawing the Avengers out into a confrontation.

The comms went silent until Steve’s voice came over again.

“Sam, see that garbage truck? Tag it.”

“It’s a battering ram,” said Tony. He’d read the reports, he knew what Sam would report back. “Loaded to the max.”

“We don’t know –” Steve began but was cut off.

“Stark’s right, Steve. Max capacity,” confirmed Sam.

“Go now! He’s not hitting the police! It’s the Institute!”

Tony wanted to make a smarmy remark that he had been right, but now wouldn’t be the right time. “I’ll suit up. If Rumlow makes it this far…” Tony trailed off as he heard a loud crash followed by gunshots as the assault on the Institute began.

“We need him alive, Stark!” Rogers ordered over the comms.

“You do not need to remind me!” hissed Tony as he activated his suit, pressing his fingers on the Arc Reactor magnetised to his chest. Nanonites ran down his entire body, forming red and gold armour, swirling and clicking into place, locking the suit together. The helmet shut down over Tony’s face and the display appeared in front of him. He could have created the Mark 85 but had settled for the Mark 50 instead. He wouldn’t need the advanced armour for a few years yet. And he’d rather not raise too many suspicions.

Windows smashed in the room next door to his and gas started to flow out from canisters that had been fired through. Tony was thankful they had evacuated the building, less injuries that way.

“Tony! Rumlow’s inside!” Steve’s voice came over the comm.

“Got it.” Tony moved quickly out of the room, knowing Rumlow would be coming this way. They were not on his floor yet but he could detect people heading towards his level. He headed back towards the lab where Rumlow would head to. Ducking into the room and locking the door again behind him, Tony pivoted and hid beside a cupboard, hidden from view from anyone entering the lab.

He didn’t have to wait long before someone punched the door down and walked into the lab wearing heavy black armour with a gas mask on and they marched towards the case where the bioweapon should be.

Tony stepped out from his hiding place, blocking Rumlow’s exit as the man turned to face him as soon as he saw the case was empty.

“You shouldn’t be here!”

Tony smirked from within the helmet. “Sometimes things do not go to how you plan them, do they? You’re lucky I knew exactly what your target would be and could make the necessary arrangements to prevent you from stealing the biological weapon.” Raising his right arm he pointed his Gauntlet at Rumlow. “Surrender.”

Rumlow didn’t respond verbally. He simply attacked.
Tony reacted swiftly, firing his repulsor at Rumlow who ducked, running straight towards him. Tony stepped to the side, reached out and grabbed Rumlow, commanding the nanonites to clasp onto the man’s wrist, twisting his arm back behind him.

Rumlow attempted to turn back, nearly snapping his arm in the process, using his other arm, covered with another specialised gauntlet, to punch Tony in the chest.

Tony stood his ground. The Mark 50 was highly durable, not as strong as the Mark 85, but enough to deal with insignificant threats like the terrorist before him.

Rumlow tried again, struggling to free himself from the iron grip.

“I gave you an option. I suggest you take it,” reiterated Tony. He knew Rumlow wore a suicide vest. If he was going to detonate it, inside this building would be better. All the explosive materials were gone. The only people injured would be the attackers. If Rumlow managed to escape…

“Oh no!” From Rumlow’s free arm, a large knife slid out of their holdings and he swiped along Tony’s mask, barely grazing the faceplate. And then he pulled, hard, snapping his own wrist as he pulled free from Tony’s grip on his other arm. Rumlow stepped back, breathing hard. “He should have been here instead of you!”

*He means Steve…* Tony realised.

“If I can’t escape then I can cause as much damage as possible!”

Tony spied the detonator button as Rumlow turned and ran, out of the lab and towards the nearest window.

“Shit!” Tony fired his thrusters and flew forward. “Steve! Incoming!”

Tony spread his arms and grabbed Rumlow around the waist as the man reached the window and leapt out of it, depressing the detonator at the same time. Instead of falling, Tony flew out into the open air as his whole body was encased in hot heat as something tore apart in front of him. He felt intense burning through the suit and then the nanonites were blasted away, exposing his flesh to the air, as heat swept over and through him. He was thrown back by the force of the blast, windows shattering behind him and he fell through the air until he hit the ground with a sickening thud.

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Natasha twisted her body, her legs wrapped around one of her attacker’s neck, punching them on the head as she swung them down, flipping back away from them and sliding one leg underneath and tripping another attacker up.

Her earpiece crackled and Tony’s voice came over the line: “Steve! Incoming!” That could mean only one thing. Rumlow was on his way…

There was an almighty crash overhead as Rumlow leaped out of the third-floor window but then Tony was there, grabbing hold of Rumlow as his body exploded spectacularly. Tony was thrown away from the force of the blast and she could see his suit melt in the devastating heat of the explosion, exposing the front of his body to the debris and flesh and blood of Rumlow’s body and parts of the Institute as the windows around it shattered from the heat. The building shook and a part of the wall crumbled forward, landing in the foyer in front of her.

Tony was thrown back, his body falling before he hit the floor with a thud.
“Tony!” Natasha scrambled for her feet and rushed over to him. He was lying completely still, half of his suit torn away from the force of the blast and his face was slightly burned and bleeding. “Come on, Stark, don’t do this to me! I still need you!” She felt for his pulse and was relieved to find a strong heartbeat at the base of his throat. Relief swept through her. Not all was lost. Though how Tony had got here…

No, she’d dwell on it later.

She hadn’t expected him to turn up.

She’d been expecting someone else.

“Why do you… still need… me…? Agent… Romanoff?” coughed Tony as he opened his eyes slowly.

“No reason,” she said. Now was not the time.

“Stark!” Steve was running over, as was Wanda and Sam. “Is he alright?”

Natasha nodded. “He is. He just got caught in Rumlow’s suicide bomb, just a few burns, nothing that cannot be fixed quickly,” she smiled, relieved. “But he stopped it from becoming something worse. If Tony hadn’t been inside the building when he attacked…”

“Rumlow could have escaped and caused a lot of damage in the marketplace,” relented Steve. “You were right, Tony, about where he intended to hit.”

Tony winced as he tried to sit up. “Yeah, well, maybe you’ll listen to me more, now.”

Natasha couldn’t help but chuckle. “Come on, you’ve averted a wider catastrophe. You need medical.”

Thankfully Tony had only suffered minor burns, his suit having taken the majority of the explosion as it was ripped from him in the blast. On the ride back to the Avengers Facility, Tony had spent the flight with a cold compress over parts of his face, arms, and chest where the explosion had most affected, after running cold water over the areas first. He took some antibiotics to reduce infection and instructed Friday to order in a soothing cream which would help the skin heal faster. The damage was not too severe once he was cleaned up.

Once they arrived back at the facility, Tony asked Steve to write a report for him as he could use it with his negotiations regarding the Accords. He promised Steve they would sit down and discuss the positives and negatives of such a panel operating the Avengers, but first, he needed to rest and heal from his injuries.

Making his way slowly to his room, Tony sat on the edge of his bed, glancing around. He’d prevented a wider tragedy from occurring. The Wakandan Aid Relief workers hadn’t died. He’d stopped Rumlow from ever reaching the marketplace and becoming a danger, and therefore ensured Wanda did not use her powers to throw Rumlow away. Though the original incident had been unfortunate, Tony had wanted to avoid that specific situation again, because it was partly the reason why the Accords had been pushed quicker through the processes to become law. Now, the Accords wouldn’t be implemented as quickly, meaning T’Challa’s father wouldn’t die at the signing of the Accords.

Just one simple change had a butterfly effect.
One thing did nag at him, however: the enigma that was Natasha Romanoff.

He’d already suspected something off about her. She had seemed quite relieved he was still alive after the blast and some of the words she’d said to him, as he stirred from consciousness, resonated with him, and his suspicions had been raised further.

*If I died and came back here, why not Nat too?*

He heard movement from behind him as his door to his quarters opened and soft footsteps entered.

“Hello Tony,” Natasha said.

Tony turned slowly to face her, taking in her soft red hair around her shoulders and her green eyes shining brightly, a gentle smile on her face.

He leaned back, a teasing smile at the corner of his lips. “Tell me, Agent Romanoff, how was Vormir?”

*To be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

How many people guessed the Natasha twist? :D But how long has she been back for, that is the question...

Next week, Tony and Natasha talk...

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Three: Revelations

Chapter Summary

Tony and Natasha discuss their unique circumstances...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Wow, the response to the cliffhanger of the last chapter was astounding. Yes, Nat is back as well. Tony isn't alone in his mission! I hope this chapter isn't a disappointment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER THREE: Revelations

4th May 2016

“Tell me, Agent Romanoff, how was Vormir?”

“I didn’t particularly enjoy the skydive I did without a parachute… It could have ended better.”

He wanted to shout for joy. There was no way this was not his Natasha. “It is you,” he whispered. “Clint said you fell…”

“We fought. Someone had to do it and Clint had a family to go home to. And, I had red in my ledger…”

“Nat… you made up for that years ago…”

“I never believed I did. But sacrificing myself so we could bring everyone back? I cleared the red in my ledger, Tony.” She moved to sit beside him on the bed.

He surprised himself by wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in for a hug. “God, when you didn’t appear back on the platform… Nat, don’t ever do anything like that again, okay?”

She embraced his hug, wrapping her arms around him too. “If there is no other way…”

“No, there is. There has to be,” Tony answered. “We’re both here for a reason. We didn’t die and be sent back if we were not going to change our deaths.”

Natasha pulled back, looking up at him with her intense green eyes. “You… died?”

“Surely you must have guessed…”

“I hoped you hadn’t…” She squeezed his arm. “Pepper… Morgan.”
“I know.” He bowed his head, tears threatening to fall as he thought of them.

“Who else died?” she asked quietly.

“No one. Just us.”

She paused but her answer was barely a whisper. “We won?”

He nodded. “We did.”

“But… if it worked… and we won…” She moved from the bed and began pacing. “Why have we been sent back?”

Tony shrugged. “To fix things.” At least that was what the mysterious voice in his head had informed him.

“Wait,” she turned to face him, “if we won, how come you died?”

“Turns out messing with time means it can mess back with you,” he explained. “We brought everyone back. Bruce did it. He was the only one strong enough to wield the stones without dying. But… moments later the Compound was blown to pieces. Thanos was there with his army.”

Natasha raised a hand. “Hold on, Thanos? I was there when Thor killed him.”


The words floated into his head as if he had always known those details.

“My guess is this Thanos was from a branch reality which was created when Rhodey and Nebula retrieved the Power Stone. We knew from Nebula that the time we were aiming for was around the days when Thanos was actively looking for the Power Stone. I think he must have found out… Wait…” His mind was whirring and he gasped. “Nebula disappeared when we had all the stones… She wasn’t there for the Snap…” He jumped from the bed, running his hands through his hair. “She did it! She brought Thanos from the past! But… she hates him… why would she?” He was talking more to himself now.

“Nebula once told me she was connected to a network. A network Thanos has access to,” remembered Natasha.

“Of course! That’s it!” Tony was jubilant. “The Nebula that came back with Rhodey wasn’t our Nebula! It was her past self! That’s why Thanos arrived.” Tony sat back on the edge of the bed. “We had to fight Thanos and his army. We were out of practice, Nat. Even Thor struggled. It was bleak… then the cavalry arrived. All of the Avengers assembled together and we faced Thanos’ army. Pepper was there…” His face shined as he remembered Pepper fighting in the Rescue armour, how she had proven to be at ease within it. “Thanos knew we had the stones. He kept trying to take them from us. The time machine was destroyed when his ship came through and our only option to get rid of them was to get back into the Quantum Realm. Scott’s van was on the battlefield. But Thanos, he got hold of the stones… Nat, he was going to wipe out the entire universe and rebuild it in his image. Carol arrived and destroyed his ship but she got blasted by the Power Stone and thrown away… It was the only way, Nat. The stones were in a gauntlet I had made. It resonated with my own suit… I attacked Thanos, one last effort to stop him from killing all life in the universe…”

Tony looked at his right arm, shuddering suddenly.
“The nanonites in my suit stole the stones from the Gauntlet. Thanos didn’t notice. When he tried to
snap his fingers, that’s when he knew I had the stones.”

“Oh, Tony…” Natasha swallowed. He could see in her expression she already knew what he’d
done and the heavy price he had paid for his act of self-sacrifice.

“I killed him,” choked out Tony. “Killed him and his whole army.” He was still standing in front of
Natasha but the reality of what he had done was crashing down around him. Of what he had given.
Of what he had lost. “Pepper… She was there…” He could feel tears welling in his eyes. He never
cried. Tony Stark never cried. “I remember dying… my vision going… the next thing I know I’m
waking up here.”

Natasha got to her feet and gently pulled Tony into a hug. “It’s alright. You’ve been through a lot.
You threw yourself right into this new time without really coming to terms with what had happened
to you.”

Pulling away from her embrace, Tony fumbled for a handkerchief and dried his wet eyes. “Pepper
was the last thing I saw. She said I could rest now… Obviously, I can’t if I’m here.”

Natasha winced. “I think you’re here because of my choices, Tony.”

He looked at her sharply. “What do you mean?” He frowned, his eyes still shimmering with tears.
“When I was regaining consciousness in Lagos, you said you still needed me. Why?”

Nat shifted away from Tony so she was facing him. “How long do you think I’ve been here,
Tony?”

“Slightly longer than me. A few weeks?” he answered.

She shook her head, her hair falling about her shoulders. “Two years.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “What? Two years?”

“Maybe I should start at the beginning?” she suggested.

Tony nodded for her to continue.

“When I died, I retained consciousness. I didn’t know where I was. I remember seeing orange
skies… orange water… I was just there… in the water. I’m not sure how long I was there for…
Then I heard a voice calling my name. It told me I had a choice to make. I could accept my fate
and move on or live again and save everybody. I chose the second option because I assumed it
meant my sacrifice hadn’t meant anything, that all of you had failed…”

Tony shook his head. “No, we won. I beat him. I was nearly out of it but I remember seeing his
army begin to turn to dust. I never really saw Thanos go but I made sure to target him… And we’d
bought everyone back too. We won, Nat.”

She frowned, looking a little confused. “But then why give me the option to choose?”

“Because maybe we are meant to stop Thanos from using the stones in the first place,” Tony
reasoned. “The universe was destabilised in the wake of the Decimation. Imagine what it could be
like in the aftermath of everyone being brought back? People moved on with their lives. Some, not
all but those that did… If their loved ones returned… how chaotic would it be?”

“We’ll never know as we are not there.”
“Why do you believe I am here because of your choices?” he asked. It had been curious wording from her. Nat had been given a choice, he hadn’t unless he couldn’t consciously remember being given one.

“After I made my choice the voice told me I’d be sent back but I could only waken in the year I died in, which was 2014. It told me it wasn’t time for me to change anything just yet and if I’d tried, outside forces would prevent me from doing so. And, believe me, I tried to expose Hydra, prevent Ultron, everything but each time I attempted it, I was stopped. The voice kept telling me, these last two years, I had to wait for someone else, that I needed them. They wouldn’t tell me who. Only that I’d know when events started to change.”

“Ah, so you knew as soon as I stepped into the planning room,” deduced Tony.

“Yes. You were never involved with Lagos. Admittedly, I assumed it would be Steve. I wasn’t sure if the voice meant someone else would die but I always thought it would be Steve who’d go down fighting… and he’d be the one to arrive. I spent so much time around Steve the last few years, so to me, it made sense to be him.”

Tony wasn’t sure whether to feel offended or not. “You know I’ve made more sacrifice plays than Cap has, right?”

Natasha winced. “I know.”

“Still,” assured Tony, “if our original timeline isn’t the one we are altering —”

_It is._ The voice echoed around his head.

“Mysterious voice says it is!” Tony rolled his eyes.

Natasha cracked a smile. “You’ll get used to the voice. I hadn’t heard it in a while… then you arrived,”

“At least we’re in this together. I’m glad I’m not alone.”

“It’s nice I can finally do something instead of living the same thing again.”

Tony chuckled. “So…” He leaned back, hands resting behind him, supporting himself on the bed. “Got any ideas on where to start other than what I’ve already started on?”

“A fair few,” she admitted, “mainly involving how to obtain the Infinity Stones earlier.”

“Hmm. We need to keep the team together, Nat,” said Tony quietly. “We cannot let ourselves split over the Accords.”

“Agreed. We need to prevent what’s occurring now.” She inclined her head. “What have you started on?”

“We both know Barnes is hiding in Bucharest but I’ve ordered Friday to start a worldwide search for him so I can convince Rogers I did my research.”

“Good idea. I don’t believe telling Steve about… our conditions… would be a good idea.”

Tony nodded his head. “Definitely not. The fewer people who know about us, the better. I’ve got her also searching for Helmut Zemo. He’s either putting his plans in motion or he has yet to act… I want to find him before he begins to act. We have a few weeks before we really need to worry.
22nd June is the day he plants the bomb and frames Barnes. Ideally, I’d like to capture him then if we are unable to locate him prior.”

“Good. We need the intel to back up our assertions if we are going to exonerate Barnes from any wrongdoing,” valued Nat.

“I’m also tracking Stephen Strange. I think we need his involvement in this but we have to wait until he becomes the Supreme Sorcerer or whatever he will become,” finished Tony. “But that isn’t all. We need to call in Carol and make links with the Guardians.”

“Calling in Carol will be difficult. Fury keeps the pager with him at all times…”

Tony frowned and sat forward. “We need to convince Fury somehow… Telling him is not an option. The only person I want to tell is Pepper.”

Natasha grimaced. “What if telling Pepper backfires?”

“It won’t,” he smiled. “I’ve got a feeling telling her everything is the right move.”

*It is.*

“Oh.” Natasha jumped.

“You heard?” he grinned.

“Yeah. Whoever the voices are they are trying to pinpoint us in the right direction. We need an ally, Nat. Pep is the best one. And… I cannot keep secrets from her.” Tony’s lips twitched. “She’s already had to suffer enough… watching me die.”

“She won’t this time,” assured Nat.

Tony didn’t comment, just pulled a face. “God… I just think of how strong she was in my final moments. She didn’t cry… She kept on smiling, knowing it would be the last thing I’d see. She was so strong… I didn’t want to go, Nat…” He turned his head away, the tears threatening to fall again.

“Most of us don’t,” she answered quietly, moving closer to Tony, resting her head on his shoulder. “We both made the choice to die, knowing what it would cost us. We were at our endgame.”

“We thought we were,” noted Tony sighing. “We were wrong. We’re still needed.”

“Seems the universe cannot cope without us, Stark,” quipped Natasha, laughing quietly. Then her face grew more serious. “So, long term goals: stop Thanos. Short term goals: keep the team together.”

“Yeah. A middle goal for us is making contact with Carol and/or the Guardians. We’re lucky the Accords are not being pushed forward as quickly so Zemo may not be able to break us apart as he hopes. I do know several countries are calling for them to be ratified. I think we should operate on the assumption they will be happening. Instead of the government coming to us about them, we should be going to the United Nations ourselves to work with them. It may mitigate the impact they’d have on our activities if we show a willingness to co-operate with the international community.”

“But how do we sell the idea to Steve?”
Tony leaned back, frowning. Steve was the problem. His moral compass wouldn’t allow him to compromise. Steve wanted to do things his way because he believed it to be the right way. “Leave that to me. I think you should discuss it with the others… and… reach out to Clint. And Scott too. I know we haven’t officially met him yet either but we need to be on good terms with him and…”

Tony paused. “No. Leave the Pym’s to me. Hank Pym hates me simply because of my father. I need to be the one to reach out.”

“Right. We have a plan then.”

“We do. We also need our own secret communication channel. I’ll build a wrist device which will allow us to communicate discreetly. And that’s another thing, I’m going to avoid involving Ross in the Accords business. His involvement last time didn’t help matters,” explained Tony. “We may not have any choice in dealing with him at some points but it is doable. It is important we go to the United Nations as a united front to work with them or we’ll find ourselves split…”

Nat’s expression was stern. “We have to prevent it from happening.”

“We’re gonna have a rough couple of months with this, Nat…” Tony looked at her. He felt old, wanting to be back at home in his cabin with Morgan and telling her stories of what he used to do. But he couldn’t because she didn’t exist just yet nor did the cabin as he’d built it from scratch.

“I know. You’re lucky, Tony,” she smiled wearily. “You didn’t have to wait for two years, living through the same thing, knowing you could do nothing to change it. Waiting for you has been… hard.”

“I’m here now, Nat,” he replied quietly. “We’ve been given a blessing and a curse.”

“Two years to not mess this up,” she pointed out.

“Two years before Thanos,” swallowed Tony. He was not looking forward to facing him again. He knew he would. And that was when he remembered, the secrets he had carried with him since Titan, the words Thanos had said to him… “There’s something about Thanos and me which I never told any of you about when I got back from Titan. And… God.. Nat, it terrifies me.”

Natasha caught his gaze, studying him. “Tony, what is it?” She reached forward and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to say.”

He swallowed, knowing it was the right thing to do to tell Natasha. If they were going to be working together she had to know. His trip to another planet had continued to haunt him on a regular basis even after Morgan had been born. Waking up from nightmares had become a regular occurrence. “I was the last one standing. Nat. He threw a moon at me… But when I flew back down to face him, to defend Strange, to stop Thanos from taking the stone… Nat… He said my name. He said ‘Stark’.”

Natasha’s eyebrows rose up in surprise. “He said your name?”

Tony nodded slowly. “Yeah. When I queried it, he said I wasn’t the only one cursed with knowledge… I don’t know what he meant. Or really understand how he knew my name. It’s like… He knows me.”

*Thanos was behind the attack on New York in 2012.*

The voice echoed through their heads. They both glanced at one another.

“We knew he was behind it… Bruce told us,” observed Natasha. “But… why you?”
Tony didn’t need a voice to tell him why. He already knew. “The missile… I destroyed his army, didn’t I? He might not have cared about the rest of you because you just fought his army…” Tony began to reason.

Natasha gasped. “But he would want to know who repelled his invasion, successfully ended it.”

Tony shuddered, a shiver running down his spine. “It’s scary thinking he may have done his research on me. He was eager to fight me one-on-one. When I launched my first attack I heard him say ‘come on’ as if he was preparing himself to face me, as if he had been anticipating fighting me for a long time.” He was surprised how much he still remembered of the fight, even years after it had happened. “It was short. But I lasted the longest. I managed to draw blood after using a variety of attacks. He just came at me, Nat. Punching, hitting me… tearing my suit from me. Picking me up and hitting me at point-blank range with the Power Stone. I tried everything to fend off his attacks… even tried to stab him.” The others had never known of his stab wound as Nebula had already healed it before his return to Earth. “That backfired spectacularly on me. Turned my own weapon against me and stabbed it through my right side.”

“He DID WHAT?” Natasha shrieked. “Why did you not say anything before?”

Tony winced. “Blue meanie helped me before Carol rescued us. Only two who ended up knowing were Pepper and Rhodey. I didn’t want to admit what he did to me. Or what he said. There’s more… I couldn’t fight after he stabbed me. Pushed me back until he could force me to sit on some rocks… He put the Gauntlet on my head, forced me to look at him. He said to me I had his respect, that half of humanity would still be alive, which was true…He shoved me back, stood back up… He told me he hoped people would remember me… He was gonna kill me with the stones. He pointed the Gauntlet at me, all four stones lighted up… And then Strange bargained for my life. Willingly gave up the Time Stone to spare me. I guess we know why he did. He knew what the outcome would be when he looked into the future and saw one way to win. He knew I had to be alive…” He’d never revealed Strange had looked into the future and when he saw Natasha’s questioning glance, he decided to elaborate. “Before Thanos arrived on Titan, Strange looked into the future with the Time Stone. He searched for many different ways to win… We lost in all but one of those futures. He was right… but the cost of that future was…”

“Our lives,” finished Natasha quietly.

Tony sighed. “Yeah, our lives, but we’ve been given another chance. Why we don’t know. We just have to work with what we’ve got and hopefully we can beat the timeframe set down upon us.”

“We will.” Natasha caught his gaze. “I do not intend to die failing. We will succeed, Tony, but we need to work together. And… with what you’ve revealed about Thanos and you… it may be something we can use against him.”

Tony wasn’t sure whether he liked it or not. “Maybe…”

She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You won’t be alone next time you face him. I’ll be there too. We’ll face this together.”

A slight smile tugged at his lips. “Thanks, Nat. Thank you.”

“We’re a team, Stark.” She stood from the bed and placed one hand on her hip and held out her right one to him. “Come on. We’ve got work to do.”

To be continued...
Chapter 3 illustration of Nat arriving at Tony's room, draw by the wonderful and talented JediPanda22! Please check out the rest of their artwork on their Instagram page: JediPanda22!

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

So, Nat has been around since 2014, unable to change anything until Tony turned up. You might wonder why Nat couldn't have travelled forward in time to 2016, but that is the rules she was told and she was actively prevented from altering anything until Tony arrived. The big question is, why was Tony sent back? Who/what/when is behind it?

I think, based on Endgame, Nat and Nebula got quite close as they must have talked over the five years Nat ran the Avengers and Tony already had his friendship with her too so I don't think its unreasonable to assume they would come to the conclusion that it was an evil duplicate of Nebula which returned in their Nebula's place, resulting in Tony having to wield the Gauntlet.

Nat and Tony have begun planning what to do... The first is to ensure the team stays together during the Accords process. Can they succeed? There is so much to come in this fic. I also wanted to establish the Tony and Thanos rivalry. I was always disappointed it wasn't really paid off in Endgame with 2014 Thanos recognising Tony... So, the whole Tony and Thanos rivalry will be a big part of this fic!

Next chapter: Steve and the Accords... The Civil War storyline will roughly last ten chapters I think.
Will be posted probably early Sunday next week or late Sunday evening UK time as I am working that day.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Four: The Accords

Chapter Summary

Tony and Natasha present the Accords to the assembled Avengers...

Chapter Notes

Again, wow, thank you for all the comments for the last chapter!

Updating slightly earlier than normal today because I am working this afternoon and I wanted to get this out before I left. It's quite a long chapter, over 6000 words! Hopefully, it is not too long and boring, but I feel this is an essential chapter that is needed to push the plot forward. Once we get past the Civil War storyline, things will begin to move quickly.

I have had several questions/requests regarding whether this will be Natasha/Steve fic. I'm not a big fan of Steve however I can promise there will be lots of interaction between him and Natasha so if you want to take this is a precursor towards a relationship please do, but there won't be any romance between the two in this story.

Secondly, yes, Peter Parker will be joining this story. He will play a role in Tony's life.

And thirdly, I made a bit of an error in the previous chapter by stating the Accords signing in Civil War happened on May 22nd. It didn't. Lagos happened beginning of May but the Accords signing in Vienna occurred in June so I've gone back and altered it to bring it up-to-date.

Please, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FOUR: The Accords

Friday 6th May 2016

Missouri

Natasha stood at the edge of Clint’s property; her eyes focused on the quaint farmhouse the Barton family had made their home. She remembered the last time she had visited the farm. It was just after half the population had been wiped out. Clint had been unresponsive and Nat had feared the worst. Travelling alone to his secluded farmhouse, Natasha had found the property deserted. The only thing she had found to indicate Clint had survived was a scrawled note in his living room stating the words: Leave me alone.

Respecting his wishes, Natasha had left Clint alone, having guessed his whole family had been taken in the Decimation. It was the only explanation as to why Clint had disappeared and didn’t
want to be found. Of course, a few months later the first reports of Clint murdering people who, in his mind, should have been taken, sprung into her radar. She’d spent years trying to track him down but failing each time, until just before Tony had returned to the Avengers with the solution for time travel.

But now, Clint was at home with his family, not even aware of what the future held. Natasha needed to bring Clint into the fold, and Tony wanted everyone there to discuss the Accords and for a group decision to be made. It was her job to convince Clint to accompany her back to the Compound. She was sure she could.

Making her way across the grass and onto Barton’s porch, Natasha knocked on his front door.

“Nat…” Laura Barton answered the door, her face breaking out into a smile.

“Hi… Is Clint home?”

“He’s in the barn with Cooper. Do you want to come in?” Laura offered.

Natasha shook her head. “Not today. I need to talk to Clint about something quite important. I may need to borrow him for a while…”

Laura sighed. “Another world-ending threat?”

Natasha winced. “Not exactly… He won’t be gone for long. A few days at most. Nothing bad will happen.” *I hope*, she added internally.

“No dangerous mission then?” Laura asked hopefully.

“No, definitely not,” Natasha smiled and glanced over towards the barn. “Will it be alright if I interrupt them?”

“It’s fine. It’s nearly time for lunch. Can you ask Cooper to come back for his sandwiches?”

“Sure.” Natasha stepped away. “I’ll make sure to come by before we leave to see Nate and Lila.”

“Please do, I’m sure Lila would love to see her favourite aunt,” laughed Laura, watching Natasha walk across the grass and onto the path which led towards the barn.

The cool breeze air picked up Natasha’s shoulder-length hair. She felt calm. She always felt safe on the farm. It was a piece of seclusion she could not receive anywhere else. Many times she had visited the farm just to get away from everything.

The door to the barn was slightly ajar and Natasha stepped inside. Clint and his son were sitting at a worktable, tools scattered around them as they worked. “Hey, boys.” She stepped into the light shining through the rafters above.

Clint glanced up and his face split into a large grin. “Nat! What are you doing here?”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a social visit.” Natasha approached the table. “Hey, Cooper, what’s he teaching you?”

“Lila likes archery so we’re making her a bow for her birthday. Dad is showing me the tricks of the trade!” grinned Cooper, pushing his chair out behind him to give her a hug.

“My, you are growing big! You’ve sprouted a lot in a year!”
“You should see Lila,” laughed Clint. “She’s unrecognisable. She’s gone from being tiny to having a growth spurt in a short space of time.”

“I promised Laura I’d see both Lila and Nate before I left today.” Nat hugged Clint, turning to look back to Cooper. “Do you mind? I need to talk to your dad. Your mum told me your lunch is ready.”

Cooper started to jog away, turned back and waved to Natasha. “Thanks, Aunt Nat!”

She waved back, her heart pulling for those words. She hadn’t been called ‘Aunt Nat’ in a long time.

Once Cooper was gone, Natasha turned back to face Clint, who was leaning against the defunct tractor sitting in the middle of the barn. “What brings you here? This isn’t a social call, I take it?”

Shaking her head, Natasha sighed. “No, it isn’t. I need you to come back to the Compound with me. There are things we need to discuss as a team. There is new legislation coming in called The Sokovia Accords which will affect how we operate as a team.”

Clint frowned. “The Sokovia Accords? Isn’t Sokovia where Wanda is from?”

“It is…” Natasha hesitated. “The incident with Ultron has caused ramifications. New legislation is coming in to govern the Avengers. Tony has been working with the United Nations with the legislation, however, he is concerned the team will fall apart if we do not work together to ensure the correct legislation is put in place which pleases everybody on the team. We need you for a few days to discuss this. You may not be on active duty for now but you are still one of us.”

“And what happens if we cannot agree?” Clint walked around the barn. “I’ve got a young family, Nat. I can’t be on active duty anymore. Does this really concern me?”

Natasha wanted to say Clint would come out of retirement on the words of Steve Rogers alone, just because the man asked, but that hadn’t happened yet. This whole meeting Tony wanted to hold was to stop the team from splitting onto different sides. The words she wanted to say would only be relevant if Clint did choose a side.

“It concerns everyone who was and is an Avenger,” replied Natasha quietly. “Clint, we value your input. You’ll be back before you know it.”

Clint laughed. “You’ve said that before. Then everything has gone to shit.”

A wry smile crossed her face. “It won’t this time. You coming?”

“Anything for you, Nat.”

“Wouldn’t be the same without you, Clint,” she grinned. “Before we go I need to see Lila and Nate. I’m sure Lila wouldn’t forgive me if I didn’t say hello to her since I’m here…” joked Natasha, leading the way back to the farmhouse.

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Saturday 7th May 2016

Avengers Facility

Everyone was seated around the conference table. Sat in the middle was a draft copy of the new legislation, the Sokovia Accords. Tony sat next to Natasha, the two having decided to present a
united front rather than risk being on two different sides of the table. Tony held his tablet in front of him, waiting for everyone to settle before starting.

He was facing Steve with Wanda and Sam either side. Clint sat at the bottom of the table with Rhodey at the head. Vision seated himself close to Wanda.

“Thank you all for coming at short notice,” began Tony. “You may or not be aware of new legislation coming in that will affect how we operate as a team.” He pointed to the Sokovia Accords in the centre of the table. “This is legislation which has been in the works for a while now, since Ultron. There were whisperings of this after Steve exposed Hydra within SHIELD. But it didn’t really reach international attention until after Ultron. The US government wishes for us to comply with the Accords. The timeframe to ratify them is by the end of June. I want to keep this team together, so does Nat. We both propose working together to ensure we sign a version of the Accords which suits us all. No legislation can be perfect for us. There will be things within it we disagree with. That is the way things work in the real world.” He focused his eyes briefly on Steve. He would be the one who would object most to this legislation. Tony was expecting it.

Clint folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. “I got the general gist of what the Accords are about. It’s about taking responsibility for our actions. You said this only came to a head because of Ultron. The rest of us do not need this legislation to govern us, Stark. It’s only you who needs it. Ultron was your fault.”

Clint had always been blunt, Tony knew that.

Tony traded a quick glance with Natasha, seeing her roll her eyes at Clint’s words. Tony could have let the accusation go, something he would have done if the circumstances were different. He’d never told the Avengers why he had created Ultron in the first place. This was the perfect time to do so, to clear some air.

“Creating Ultron wasn’t as simple as you believe, Clint,” said Tony quietly. “I wasn’t the only one who Wanda got her hands on.” He swept his gaze to the young woman who cringed. “I’ve kept this quiet out of respect for Wanda wanting to make up for her involvement in Ultron. Wanda did use her powers on me when we captured Baron Von Strucker. It was just before I took the sceptre. I saw all of you dead or dying around me, the army from New York heading through another portal to invade Earth.” He turned to face Wanda. “That nightmare or vision you gave me was directly responsible for why I reactivated the Ultron Project. Ultron was an abandoned project, deemed too dangerous to proceed with… but that vision? Whatever you did to me, influenced me to take the risk, and in doing so I nearly doomed the entire planet. Sokovia does lie squarely at my feet because I let your mind tricks get the better of me but if you hadn’t have done it, I wouldn’t have been so insistent on creating an A.I to protect the world. I’ve created plenty of A.I’s and none of them have become a threat to the planet until you messed with my head.”

Wanda bowed her head, her cheeks flushing red. “You killed my parents. I wanted revenge.”

Tony sighed. This wasn’t the time and place to have this conversation yet the others needed to understand. “And you wanted me dead too. Wanda, I had nothing to do with your parent’s deaths.”

“It was your name on the bomb!” she retorted angrily.

“Wait.” Rhodey raised his hands. “You hate Tony because his name was on the bomb which killed your parents? Do you realise how stupid that sounds? You’re blaming the man who designed the weapons rather than the people who launched the bomb in the first place! That’s…” Rhodey shook his head. “Mess up.”
“And those bombs were fake anyway,” said Tony. He’d researched it. “None of the bombs I designed were duds. I had a 100% track record. Every single one was manufactured to the highest standards. I learned later, Wanda, that to keep a tidy profit for himself, the man who I thought cared about me, had been betraying me for years. He sold my weapons on the black market, had a side business where he manufactured fake Stark Industries weapons at a cheaper price but still marketed them as the genuine article. It was those weapons which were sold to Hydra in Sokovia. They didn’t have a high safety record. When I found out the extent of Stane’s betrayal, I shut it down, destroyed all the weapons which were sold illegally. I’ve been taking accountability for my mistakes for years.’’ He shot Clint a glare. “How many of you have contributed to helping Sokovia since Ultron? How much money did you pay, Steve, to help clear up the damage caused by the Helicarriers? Did you stay and help? Did you contribute at all? I wasn’t even involved in it and yet my company, on my direction, actively involved itself in clearing up the messes that have been made by other people! Do not tell me I do not take accountability for my actions. I do it for all of you as well even when I’m not involved!’’

Everyone was silent around the table.

Natasha looked at each and every one of them before she finally spoke. “A lot of us have misjudged Tony over the years. This needs to stop. How many of us have offered to help clear up after we’ve fought somewhere? How many of us have reached out to the public and apologised for our actions? We may be saving the world but a high cost is still paid by others. Tony understands this. He does take accountability for his actions. Becoming Iron Man was his first step at taking accountability. We have to stick together on this otherwise the outcome if we do not could be… catastrophic, especially if we are ever faced with another world-ending threat.”

She was referring to the threat Thanos posed to them, not that the other Avengers knew it yet of course.

“What if we disagree with the whole concept of the Accords?” queried Steve.

“Then you are off the team,’’ stated Natasha before Tony could reply. “Whether you like the idea of them or not doesn’t matter. They will still become law. A law we will have to obey and if you continue working with the Avengers illegally you would be arrested.’’

“If I do not sign them, the Accords would not apply to me,’’ said Steve. “I wouldn’t have agreed to them.’’

Tony almost put his head in his hands. “That isn’t how the world works, Steve. If its law, regardless of whether you signed them or not, you’d still be breaking them. You’d still be punished for the illegality of your actions.’’ He locked eyes with Steve. “The best thing about these Accords is that there is legislation written into them that those which sign them can request and debate changes to them. The changes may not be passed but our hands are not completely tied. But before we make any decisions we need to discuss them in detail.’’ He held up his tablet, pointed it at a screen to the left of himself and projected his notes on the Accords so his teammates could read them. “I’ve been consulted on the Accords for the last few months. I am in favour of them though there are parts of it I do disagree with… Overall I believe it is in our best interests to abide with them because if we do not they will be forced on us and we will not have any political leeway at all. Agreeing to work with them gives us an advantage.”

Natasha took up the information. “Since Sokovia, one hundred and seventeen countries have been under discussion with the United Nations about whether the Avengers should remain a private organisation or operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel. This could mean we can only operate when we have permission to do so. Tony has been the one who has worked most on
this. He bought me into this just recently as he wanted a second opinion before proceeding further.”

It was a lie but a convincing one. Sticking together was a priority.

“The Accords do not stop us from operating in our own country. We do not have to ask for permission to act in America. It is when we enter other countries when they haven’t asked us for help is the problem. We are entering countries illegally, without going through the proper channels,” explained Tony. “This is why I was so insistent on us gaining permission to enter Nigeria. What if something had gone drastically wrong and people had died? What if one of us had made a mistake? It could all come back to haunt us. Having permission to operate in another country helps reduce the risk of us being blamed for any casualties. That onus would then fall on the government who failed to protect their own people. The Accords not only safeguards other countries but it also safeguards us.”

Steve cleared his throat. “Why should we have to ask permission to go somewhere where we are needed?”

“It’s the way the world works, Steve,” answered Rhodey quietly. “This isn’t World War II. Society has moved on. If we are to be respected by the international community, we need to be seen respecting their rules and regulations. What if they do not want our help? Are you going to force your help on them because you believe it is the right thing to do?”

Steve bit his lower lip. It was clear what the super-soldier believed.

Tony leaned across the table. “Steve, just because it is something you want to do, doesn’t give you the right to force it on others who may not want help.”

“Mr. Stark is correct. Everyone should have the right to refuse help.” Vision had been observing the proceedings carefully.

Steve sighed, glancing at the others who had yet to voice an opinion.

“Hear me out, please,” beseeched Tony. “One of the key things we would need to do is to a sign a register and provide biometric data such as fingerprints and DNA sample. This isn’t unreasonable as our fingerprints are already on record. We would have to reveal our legal names and true identities to the United Nations. Most of us are publicly known. We shouldn’t have a problem with revealing them. Would this be acceptable to everyone here?” He cast his eyes around the table, watching for the small nods of acknowledgment. “Good. At least we can agree on something.”

“I’m sensing there is more in this document we won’t be so happy about though,” noted Sam.

Tony minutely nodded. “There are some points I disagree with but as I have explained if we sign them as they are, we will have the ability to discuss with the committee other parts of the legislation we disagree with and potentially argue for them to be altered.”

“Just because they might agree to talk with us, doesn’t mean they will take our concerns seriously,” said Steve, glancing at the next screen Tony had projected onto the wall. “I do not like the idea of those with powers, like Wanda, should have to wear tracking bracelets at all times.”

“I know. I don’t like it either. It’s one of the clauses Natasha and I are fighting to get removed from the Accords.” It was one they intended to start on as soon as this meeting was over but Tony and Natasha needed the others to know that it was already being worked on, even if it was a bit of a lie. It soon wouldn’t be. “We may be able to alter it so tracking bracelets are only utilised in the event of the individual is under probation or being investigated. I’m hoping we can remove it all together
but we may need to reach a compromise with the Accords committee on this.”

Steve frowned.

“Steve,” said Nat quietly. “We cannot have it all our own way. We need to compromise too.”

“I’m the only one here who would be affected by that particular legislation,” said Wanda quietly. “I have supernatural powers.” Her hands flickered with red energy. “I’ve done so many things wrong in my life that if I need to be tracked if I’ve done something wrong then I will do it, as long as it doesn’t suppress my powers.”

Tony felt quite surprised by Wanda’s reasoning. This wasn’t something they’d covered during their original Accords meeting when Ross had presented them to the team. This time it was different because Tony was taking the initiative himself. Perhaps they would be more open to agreeing to the Accords now they would not feel so threatened by Ross?

Still, Steve was still being quite stubborn. He could tell Rogers was not happy about the legislation at all. He would take some convincing.

“Wanda, are you sure?” asked Steve quietly.

The Sokovian girl inclined her head. “If it helps the people feel safe, Steve, why shouldn’t I?”

“You could be betrayed by the government. People could get their hands on you and experiment on you and your powers. All sorts of things could go wrong, Wanda!” reasoned Steve.

Tony sighed. He’d barely gone over the legislation and Steve… He was a brick wall, refusing to budge.

Wanda’s lips twitched. “It is a risk I will have to take. I’m done being the bad guy.”

“Thank you, Wanda,” addressed Tony. He wanted to give her praise. She was being quite reasonable about this. But then she nearly signed before. “We will all be classed as enhanced individuals. This includes Nat, Clint, Sam, Rhodey and I.”

“What?” Clint objected. “I have no powers!”

“You have enhanced tech which enables you to pull off feats no ordinary human could. Having the skill you do with your bow and arrow puts you in the enhanced category. Even being a member of the Avengers places you as an enhanced individual,” pointed out Tony. “My brain is my power. The amount of advanced tech I have created? My suits enhance me to the point where I can survive circumstances no other human could. Strictly speaking, I am an enhanced individual. All of us are in some ways, regardless of whether we have powers or not.”

“Whether we have powers or not doesn’t matter. We are all members of the Avengers and the Accords will affect us as a team and therefore we have to abide by them,” reported Natasha, leaning forward. “If we break the law or become a threat to the safety of the general public, we can be detained indefinitely without trial.”

There was an uproar from Steve, Sam and Wanda’s side.

Tony groaned.

“We are working on changing that!” shouted Natasha over the vocal objections from the other three. “That part of the Accords came from Secretary Ross himself. It is a suggestion which is
highly unpopular with the majority of the countries who have signed up to support the Accords. This document is a draft and not the official, final version. Both Tony and I have put in for a meeting regarding this specific wording. We should be detained via house-arrest or on bail with a trial pending if one is required. This is one of the few pieces of legislation which will get changed."

Tony could have attested to that if he wanted to. That piece of legislation had been altered. This time, however, Tony wanted to ensure that specific piece of legislation did not make the final Accords. It would make placing the Avengers in the Raft extraordinarily difficult for Ross.

Steve looked doubtful.

“Steve,” Tony leaned forward, “please trust me on this. Nat and I are doing everything we can to keep the team together.”

“We’d be better off opposing the Accords together,” replied Steve. “How can you support something like this when it prevents us from doing our jobs?”

“Because it will be done to us. Supporting is the best option for all of us,” said Tony quietly. “We’ll at least have power.”

“Another important piece of legislation within the Accords which all the countries agree upon are that we would be prohibited from taking action in any country other than our own,” continued Natasha, seeking to move the conversation onward. “There are two ways to gain permission to operate outside the US. The first is by being given clearance by that country’s government. If that fails we would submit an urgent application to the United Nations subcommittee requesting permission. The subcommittee can overrule the wishes of the government. All the countries have signed in agreement with this legislation. Alternatively, governments can request our aid and we can decide whether to attend or not, or they request the UN committee to dispatch us to them. It works both ways. No government has the power to deploy us outside of their national borders without having the specific permission from the aforementioned pathways. This help protects us, Steve, from operating illegally and keeping not just us safe, but others too.”

“If any of us choose to not sign, we will not be allowed to take part in any police, military or espionage activities, even within our own country, or any active missions of any kind,” added Tony. “The Avengers would not be a privately owned organisation, which is run by my money now since SHIELD fell. We would be funded by all the one hundred and seventeen nations which are signed up to the Accords.”

“What about the countries which are not signed up for the Accords?” asked Sam. “The world consists of one hundred and ninety-five, not one hundred and seventeen.”

Tony frowned, exchanged a glance with Natasha. “That… is up in the air. Still under discussion with the nations who are not interested in the Accords. As far as I am aware until the nations agree to implement the Accords, if we did attend any of the countries which are not operating under the Accords, we would be able to act freely.”

“Though it would still be best to gain permission before entering any of those countries,” added Natasha. “It would show we respect their rules and regulations instead of assuming we are needed or they would be grateful for our help. Not signing the Accords do not mean they disagree with them.”

“There are other additions to the Accords which have been made recently which we will not seek to amend,” continued Tony, changing the projection on the wall to show a list of other points in the
Accords which he felt the others needed to be aware of. “The creation of self-aware artificial intelligence is completely prohibited. This affects me. I’ve always created multiple A.I’s. Only one turned into a super-murder bot and that was due to outside influences. I lost the best A.I I had.” His eyes moved to Vision. “But he became something more, something better. None of my other A.I’s is a patch on what JARVIS was. But they are all capable of learning. I will maintain FRIDAY and the Accords committee are aware of her role with the Iron Man suit and have authorised her use, as well as approving her for use within the Avenger’s Facility and my own homes. This legislation ensures other people cannot create anymore A.I’s, and neither can I. If I do, I would have to submit myself to the committee for a review and potential imprisonment.”

“The last important piece of legislation is the use of technology to bestow individuals with innate superhuman capabilities is strictly regulated.” Natasha glanced at Wanda. “What Hydra did to you and your brother cannot happen to anyone else unless the United Nations approves it. Same with creating more super soldiers.” She glanced at Steve. “Using and distributing highly advanced technology is a crime in itself too. Anyone caught doing so without having a legal reason to do so shall be submitted to the Accords Committee and punished to the full extent of the law.”

Tony leaned back in his chair, switching off the projection. “Those are the main points we wished to take you through. I’ve sent you a copy of the draft Accords to your email accounts. Please read them and get back to me on your thoughts and opinions on anything we can fight to change.”

“When do they wish to ratify them, Tony?” asked Rhodey. “Do they have a specific date?”

“I’m hearing the end of June. I thought it was the end of this month but we’ve got just under two months to get the ball rolling on this and set changes in motion.”

“Not bad,” agreed Rhodey.

Tony cast his gaze around everyone in the room. “Please read them. I want to keep the team together… If we split over this… it could cause ramifications we cannot recover from.”

Steve reached forward and picked up the printed edition of the Accords. “I cannot promise you anything, Tony, but I’ll read them. We’ll let you know.”

Tony stood from his chair and folded his hands behind his back. “Thank you.”

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Everyone filed out of the conference room leaving Natasha alone with Steve. He was looking through the Accords, his frown deepening as he read them. “You disagree, don’t you?”

Steve sighed and placed the Accords back on the table. “I disagree. It takes away my freedom to go where I need to be.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Even if they do not want your help?” She could see he struggled with the idea people would not want his help.

“I don’t – This whole thing is hard. I know what Tony is trying to do. But these Accords will rip us apart.”

“Then why oppose them?” she asked. “If you believe they’ll rip us apart, the best thing to do, as a team, is to face them together. We need to stand and trust one another to have all of our backs, regardless. Do you trust all of us?”

“I do.”
Natasha braced herself. “Then why won’t you trust Tony with the truth about how his parents really died? I was there in the old SHIELD base with you when Zola revealed that nugget piece of information. The Winter Soldier murdered Tony’s parents. He deserves to know. You told me you would.” It was one of the things Tony wanted to happen. He wanted Steve to come to him with the truth. He felt doing so would help their friendship. Even though Tony already knew because he’d already lived it once, he needed Steve to come clean with him.

Steve had the dignity to look ashamed. “He might go after Bucky, Nat…”

“He won’t. Tony is a reasonable person. Talk to him, Steve. You want there to be trust within the Avengers?”

He nodded.

“Then keeping secrets isn’t going to help us maintain our team. What if Tony found out in the worst possible way?” She was thinking of Siberia and Tony being forced to watch the video of his parent’s deaths. Though she knew Tony wouldn’t react that way now if the same information was imparted, Steve didn’t know it. “He deserves to know. He’s always blamed his father for their deaths, for drinking and driving at the wheel when he shouldn’t have been. Tony deserves to know the truth, Steve, and the only way he will, is if you sum up the courage to tell him. It’s better coming from you than me.”

Steve swallowed. “I know. I just do not want Bucky to be hurt.”

“He won’t be,” reassured Natasha. Tony wouldn’t attack him this time. He already knew what had happened. The point was Steve didn’t trust him to tell him the truth. “Trust Tony,” she advised. “Trust him to always have your back. And we’ll make it through this whole mess with the Accords as a team.”

“You really believe Tony will not immediately start hunting Bucky down if I told him?” Steve fidgeted in his seat.

Natasha leaned forward. “I think Tony has too much on his mind now to go off on a revenge mission. If you do not trust him, Steve, with the truth, if this team breaks apart because of your secrets, it will be on you. I’m advising you because you are my friend and it is the right thing to do.”

She could only hope Steve would make the correct choice. Until Steve lifted the weight from his shoulders over the secret he kept from Tony, he wouldn’t be able to relax. Getting to her feet and walking towards the door, she glanced over her shoulder, her red hair falling in tresses over her shoulders. “Believe me when I say you can trust Tony, Steve.”

Steve only inclined his head, his eyes focused upon the document sitting in front of him. He needed to be alone and Natasha would leave him to it.

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On Monday morning Tony took his personal jet back to Malibu where Pepper was working out of Stark Industries. She didn’t know he was coming. Yet he needed to see her. He could still remember her face as he died; the mask she had worn so he wouldn’t see her upset. He’d known she was, known she would break down as soon as he had gone.

But he wanted to see her. He had to fix their relationship before it was too late.

Right now they were on a break. He remembered what had prompted Pepper to come back to him.
before.

It had been the incident in Siberia. FRIDAY had alerted Pepper as soon as his suit had gone offline. She’d organised a rescue operation. He’d arrived back at the Facility to find Pepper waiting for him, wanting to talk. They’d managed to clear the air between them and moved back in together.

Now things were different.

Siberia shouldn’t happen.

He arrived at Stark Industries, marched through the foyer and towards Pepper’s office. It was nearly the end of the working day. Politely he knocked on her office door.

“It’s open!”

Tony opened the door and walked inside.

Pepper’s eyes widened when she saw him. “Tony… I thought… Why?”

Tony stopped in front of her desk. “I’m here to take you out to dinner.”

“Tony… we’re not…”

Tony sat down, bracing himself. “I love you. Always will. I never say it enough. But I want to say it more.”

She was watching him carefully from behind her desk. “Tony… Why are you really here?”

Pepper could always read him. She knew him so well. There wasn’t much he could hide from her.

“Pep…” he sighed. “I can’t do this without you. You ground me, you keep me focused. I know I’ve made mistakes, I know I’ve messed up when I’ve put the suits before you. There are things I need to do but I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She sat back straight. “Are you proposing to me?”

He realised the context of his words. “What? No -!”

“Ah… damn it… ah, being around you can be so frustrating sometimes!”

A slight smile tugged at her beautiful face. Her hair was tied back in a pony-tail. “Now you know how I’ve felt all the years I worked for you.”

This wasn’t working out the way he had hoped it would. How could he tell Pepper about his unique circumstances if they couldn’t fix this? Siberia had been the reason they’d got back together. He rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hands. “God, Pepper, I want to do you right. I can’t give up the suits, not yet, not when the world still needs me, but I can’t lose you. You keep me sane. You made me who I am today. Without you…” He bowed his head. “Without you… I’m nothing.”

She moved from her chair then, around her desk until she was kneeling in front of him. “Tony Stark, you are not nothing! You are a hero! And I love you too but I can’t do this. When you leave on missions I worry you’ll die!”
The trouble was her fears were real. Tony had died. He hadn’t returned home. He’d left her with their daughter to raise alone. Everything Pepper had feared had come true. “Yet you were so strong…” he whispered quietly.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice was quiet, her expression worried. “What do you mean?”

He bit his lower lip. She shouldn’t have heard that. He raised his head, grabbing her hands as they rested on his knees. “Pep… I need to talk to you. Just…” He searched for the right words. “When are you free to come to the Compound?”

“Tony…” She sounded wary. “What is this about? Why are you really here?”

Tony sighed. “Pep… There are things I need to tell you… maybe even show you. Here isn’t the right time but I know we haven’t been… really… communicating since we decided to take a break… I came because I wanted to see you. And I still want to take you to dinner.” If there was one thing he did want to do, it was that. “No strings attached. Just friends, out for dinner.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Tony…”

He clutched her hands. “I’m trying, Pep, I really am to be the person who is worthy of you.”

“Tony…” She pulled him into a hug, wrapping her arms around his upper body. “We’re gonna be okay, Tony…”

A flash of Pepper’s face in his mind as he lay there dying… Those words triggering the last few moments before he’d died and been brought back. Those words… She’d said them to him then. Now he was hearing them again, only with a different context.

Resting his head on her shoulder, he whispered: “I know. I know, Pep.”

They hugged for a while before Pepper finally drew away.

“Something is bothering you,” she realised.

Tony couldn’t deny it. It was that obvious.

“I’m free at the weekend. I’ll fly over this Friday evening. Whatever is going on with you, we can talk about it then,” she said.

Smiling up at her, he hugged her again, only briefly this time. “Can I still take you out for dinner this evening?”

“Only if you are paying, Mr. Stark,” she replied, a hint of cheek in her voice.

Tony grinned back. “Of course, Miss Potts.”

- - - - -

When Tony returned to the Compound a day later, Natasha was waiting for him. She looked worried as he descended from the plane.

“You were gone longer than I expected you would be.”

Tony shrugged. “Pepper and I went for dinner. Then I slept on the couch. And then I had breakfast with her before leaving. She’s visiting on Friday for the weekend.” He lowered his voice so the workers in the hangar of the Compound wouldn’t overhear. “We need to figure out the best way to
tell her about us. The voices…”

“I know they want us to tell her, to trust Pepper…” Nat seemed doubtful. “Wouldn’t it be better if she didn’t know you’d died and been sent back?” She pressed.

“Not planning on telling her I died, just that we were sent back to stop something worse from happening.” He watched for her reaction, hunching his shoulders a bit. “I’m guessing you’re not meeting me here for an update on Pepper…”

“No, I’m not,” she answered. She held up a data-pad. “FRIDAY sent this to me twenty-five minutes ago.” On the screen was the face of the man who had framed James Barnes for the Vienna bombings originally. Now they had a chance to stop the bomb from happening altogether. “Luck is on our side, we have a location on Zemo.”

**To be continued...**

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Phew, that was a long chapter! The Accords, Natasha urging Steve to come clean to Tony about his parents, Pepper and finally a bit of progress in hunting down Zemo!

The next chapter should be posted next Sunday :)

the-writer1988
Chapter Five: Willing To Compromise

Chapter Summary

Steve comes to Tony with a decision and Tony and Nat face the Accords committee...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments so far!

I hope all this talk of the Accords isn't too boring. It needs to be sorted out before this fic can progress further. I'm aiming by Chapter 10 to have the Civil War story wrapped up, then we will be moving into the Infinity War storyline and that is when the real action and fun will start. I have a lot of plans for it so please stick with me! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FIVE

Willing to Compromise

Tuesday 10th May 2016

“Luck is on our side, we have a location on Zemo.”

Tony’s face split into a wide grin. “Where is he?”

“Cleveland.”

Tony did a double-take. “Cleveland? What’s he doing there?”

Natasha frowned. “I don’t know. Friday reports it looks like he is trying to track someone down but she cannot identify who. He’s lurking in murkier areas… as if he is watching for somebody.”

Tony placed a hand under his chin. “Are things happening faster than they should be? The bombing shouldn’t happen until the twenty-second of June. We’re still in May.”

“We don’t know how long Zemo was planning his attack,” reasoned Natasha. “He certainly had something to control Bucky with… When he was posing as the government official to assess Bucky, the lights went out and we lost everything, sound, video… The next thing we know Bucky isn’t Bucky… He’s the Winter Soldier…”

“The red book…” murmured Tony. “When Zemo was interrogated after he was captured, he spoke about the book which triggered the Winter Soldier. He doesn’t have it right now but he soon will. That’s what he is looking for.”

“The thing is, Tony, Zemo hasn’t technically done anything wrong yet. We can’t apprehend him just because we know what he does. Our knowledge only comes from our unique circumstances. It
Tony swallowed. He took the data-pad from Natasha. “There has to be a Hydra agent in Cleveland. Only former Hydra officials would have access to the red book.”

“So… Do you think Zemo and this Hydra agent were working together?”

Shaking his head, Tony flipped the page on the datapad to peruse further details on their target’s movements in Cleveland. “He’s certainly keeping a close eye on several neighbourhoods.” He glanced at Natasha. “I don’t think they were working together. Zemo acted alone. He must find whoever he is looking for soon and murders them to get that book.”

“Murder…” Natasha smiled. “That’s what we can get him on. He murders someone or even tries to we have a reason to apprehend him, a reason to put him behind bars.”

Tony nodded, beginning to pace. “But how soon will it be before he discovers the location of who he is looking for?”

Natasha shrugged. “FRIDAY is keeping a trace on him. I’ve asked her to alert us.”

“We might not get there in time…” Tony warned. “Well… I could with the suit but I’d have to leave you behind and we need to do this together.”

“There is another option.”

“What?”

“You said Pepper was there when you died.”

“Yeah…” Tony wasn’t sure where she was going with this.

“She had a suit?”

It clicked. “She did.” He scrutinised her. “You want one?”

She shrugged. “Not particularly. I’m thinking more of one just to fly to places so we can stay together. A QuinJet isn’t as fast as your suits.”

“Hmm. That is something I can do. No weaponry? Nothing like that at all?”

Natasha shook her head. “No.” She paused and then amended: “Maybe something small to defend myself with if we get attacked in the air but nothing like yours. At least I’ll be able to keep up with you. I wouldn’t use it in front of the team unless absolutely necessary.”

“Yeah,” agreed Tony, “I’m not sure they would take it well if they knew the extent of how much we are working together.”

“They’d probably want suits of their own…” Natasha quipped.

“Or try to question you why you are spending so much time with me,” noted Tony quietly.

“Using the Accords is a good excuse. I’d rather be in on them than on the outside of them. Steve is stubborn but I think he will come around.”

Tony’s lips twitched. “He nearly signed before. I offered him a chance to sign… after Bucky was brought in. Steve was offered one last chance to work with the Accords. He refused…” He bit his
lips. “It was because of Wanda… And her being locked in the Compound for her own safety. The words ‘weapon of mass destruction’ may have entered the equation.”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “You didn’t!”

Wincing, Tony stepped away. “I did!”

“Tony!” She was shocked, surprised even. Would have hit him if he hadn’t stepped away.

“I know! It was a stupid thing to say but at the time he didn’t seem to grasp why Wanda had to be kept in the Compound. He kept saying she was just a kid but she’s not. She’s in her twenties. And people were vying for her blood! And, to top it all off, she’s an illegal immigrant who doesn’t have a valid visa to be in this country. The only reason Wanda is in this country is that I am personally vouching for her.”

“She doesn’t know, does she?” Natasha murmured.

He shook his head. “No. If I do not vouch for her, there is nothing Steve can do to keep her here legally. He can fight the system all he wants. He’ll just end up getting himself arrested for obstruction of justice.”

“We need to get them to sign the Accords.”

“First, we have to make the guarantees that will make it easier for Steve to sign,” explained Tony. “His concerns are valid. Best way to beat the system is to work on the inside. Which reminds me, I have a meeting with the UN panel in a few days, I would like you to be there. Two voices from the Avengers are better than one.”

“Sure.” Natasha glanced at the datapad in Tony’s hands. “Hopefully Zemo will not make his move for a while yet.”

“I don’t think he will. We’ve got time to convince the others to sign the Accords before Zemo strikes.”

Natasha eyed him warily. “I hope you’re right about that, Stark.”

He caught her eyes. “Me too, Nat.”

Thursday 12th May 2016

Tony had sent a message to the other Avengers he was going to see the Accords committee with Natasha the next day and welcomed their feedback on them. Surprisingly Steve came to Tony’s office to talk to him about it.

“I read them. We all did. We sat down and went through the whole document,” admitted Steve. In his hands, he was holding a blue folder.

That surprised Tony. He hadn’t expected Steve to do so especially since Steve had not read the full document previously. The small changes he was currently trying to make were helping.

Tony swivelled in his chair. “And? Please take a seat.” He indicated the seat in front of his desk.

Steve sat, placing the folder in front of him and opening it.
Tony could see sheets of pages from the Accords document, photocopied with pieces of it underlined.

“Before any of us sign, we want our concerns addressed. We deserve a chance to have our own say. This folder has everything you need. If things can be sorted or safeguards put in place which addresses our concerns…” Steve hesitated. “It is something we could sign but not as they are now.”

Tony nodded, pulling the folder towards him, flicking through the folder, running his eyes over the highlighted sections and the annotations to the side. “The tracking bracelets I will bring up as well as being indefinitely detained without trial. I will seek clarification on what happens with those countries who have not signed up to the Accords.”

“If this legislation does become law there is one other thing which isn’t mentioned within the Accords which needs to be debated,” said Steve. “I feel very passionate about it.”

“Right,” answered Tony. “What is it?”

“What if we have to be somewhere where there is a life-threatening threat and we are needed there immediately? What if it is a world-ending situation? We cannot be sitting around waiting for permission.”

Tony reached for his data-pad, flipping to his copy of the Accords. “Did you miss page four hundred and sixty-five?” Holding it up, he turned it over to Steve. “It’s addressed right there.”

Steve took the data-pad, eyes running over the screen. “It’s not completely clear, Tony.”

“How is it not clear? If there is a world-ending threat we can act on it as long as we head out there we put in the relevant requests to act in that country.”

“But what if they refuse?” said Steve. “If there is a world-ending threat and we are not allowed to enter the country, what then? And it causes untold destruction because we could not act? Are we supposed to let it happen? Will we then be detained indefinitely because of our actions saving the world?”

Tony frowned and re-read the passage himself. “Ok, Cap, you have a point. It isn’t clear and we do need to clarify.” He wondered if that had been Steve’s objections to the Accords in the first place. “How do you feel about obeying the Accords when it isn’t urgent missions which need acting on straight away?”

Steve frowned, his shoulders tightening.

Tony noticed his physical reaction. “You still do not like it, do you?”

“No…” Steve shook his head. “I just…”

“Want to go where you are needed.” Tony could see what Steve was having trouble with. “Steve, we cannot do what we want in this world all the time. I do not want you to become a criminal. We have to stay together. If we defy the laws at every turn we are no better than the bad guys. Wasn’t it helpful we informed the authorities of Rumlow’s attack in Lagos? They could discreetly evacuate people and remove highly dangerous materials from being stolen. Just think what could have happened if we hadn’t informed them or gained permission? People would have died.”

“I know,” admitted Steve. “But…”
Tony watched carefully, knowing Steve was considering all the facts.

“If we are allowed to act without permission in world-ending or imminent life-threatening threats then I will sign the Accords.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “You will?” he stammered.

A small inclination of the head gave Tony his answer.

“Are you sure?” He felt he needed to clarify it again. Steve’s response was a surprise but a welcome one.

“We discussed it. Friday showed us polls and opinions on the Avengers presently. The people we save want us to not be entirely independent, to be answerable to someone. But these safeguards have to be put in place before I will agree to sign anything.”

“Wow.”

Steve cricked his head. “You seem surprised?”

He was. He really was. The Steve of his time had been completely adamant against the Accords, not willing to compromise at all. This Steve…. They’re the same, Steve! He reminded himself. “I’m just happy you are willing to compromise. We need the Avengers together, Cap…”

“You keep saying that,” mentioned Steve, leaning forward across the desk, hands clasped in front of him. “Why?”

Tony hesitated. Could he say something without giving anything away?

Yes.

He had permission.

“Something is coming, Cap. I don’t know when but something is… And we need to be together to face it. It’ll be bigger than anything we’ve faced before but it will be a lot harder to defend the Earth from this threat if we are not working with the government.”

Lowering his gaze, the other man contemplated the new information. “How long have you known?”

Tony shrugged. “Since New York. Steve, we are not prepared for what is out there. We were lucky last time but next time, we might not be so lucky. If we do not stay together we will lose. You said it yourself, last year that we would lose together too. But I’d rather be in the position to defend the Earth from now until then, rather than be operating illegally.”

“Would they really stop us if there was a world-ending threat if we didn’t sign?”

“Probably not but they’d want us to answer to it afterward.”

“Even if we saved the world?” pointed out Steve.

Tony grimaced. He knew Steve and the others had been given leave to return after Thanos. The Accords had been disbanded but it didn’t matter now as the Accords were still in play. “The Accords are the only way we stay together, Cap. I can try to change them so it is easier for us but you have to play your part too.”
“Why won’t you not sign them?” Steve locked his gaze. “You could break the law with us.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose at Steve’s suggestion. “And jeopardize my entire livelihood? They could take away all my money, my business, everything I own. I have a lot of things at stake if I do not sign. By signing, I am able to keep everything, including my suits. I can’t let them get access to them, Steve.”

“So you’ve been pushed into signing.”

Shaking his head, Tony leaned back in his chair. “No. I made the choice which works best for me and that is to sign. I can’t be any help to you if I’m in jail. The Accords are the middle ground the world needs right now. Whether they last or not is another point entirely. Until then we have to stick together. Help me help the world, Steve. We cannot afford to lose.” Again, he silently added. He held out his hand across the table hoping Steve would take it.

Focusing his eyes on Tony’s extended hand, Steve slowly reached out and took it. “We have a deal.” He pulled his hand. “Make those changes, get clarification on the points we’ve raised, and we will all sign.”

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Friday 13th May 2016

“He agreed to sign?” Natasha leaned back against the wall as they waited for admittance into the chamber where they would discuss the Accords with the committee.

“I know. I’m surprised too.” Tony walked slowly up and down the corridor. He was feeling antsy, wanting to get this meeting underway. “But it does depend on whether we can get the changes made to the Accords. It’s the only way we’re going to keep the team together. I can’t go on the run. I told Steve why I couldn’t. I cannot afford to not obey them.”

“I think you did the right thing,” observed Natasha quietly. “We’ve both learned from our mistakes. I shouldn’t have helped Steve at the airport and allowed them to escape. I knew Steve would keep trying no matter what. Zemo wouldn’t have been able to split us further apart if I hadn’t helped Steve. But the answer is not splitting. It feels right to be working under the Accords.”

“It will be easier to prepare the world this way,” said Tony. “Minimise the damage Thanos may make.” He glanced up as the doors to the chamber opened and they were beckoned inside.

The room was circular and a long table was set up in the middle of it. Six seats were positioned on one side with the other two seats on the other side for Tony and Natasha. The six seats were filled, three men and three with women representing the six continents across the world. Each person represented the wishes and desires of the nations within those continents.

Thaddeus Ross was the representative for North America and he sat at the table, his eyes piercing bright as he watched Tony and Natasha take a seat each. He didn’t look happy, his cheeks slightly red as if he had already been arguing with his respective counterparts.

“Secretary Ross,” Tony inclined his head. He turned his attention to the other representatives in the room, introducing each one to Natasha. “Laura Templar, representing Europe; Sergio Ballard representing South America; Marcel Kech sits for Australia; Georgianna Melhar represents Asia and Afolabi Adebayo stands for Africa.”

“It’s good to meet you all,” said Natasha. “I hope you do not mind me accompanying Tony to this
meeting. He has—” She was cut off by Thaddeus Ross’s very loud voice as he attempted to discredit him.

“In fact, we do mind. This is supposed to be a classified meeting between us and Mr. Stark. I respectfully ask you to leave.” His counterparts all gave him a look but Ross ignored them.

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “No. I’m staying here.”

“If she’s not allowed in the meeting then I refuse to attend.” Tony got to his feet.

“It is compulsory for you to attend, Stark,” warned Ross. “You are already in enough trouble for talking to the Avengers about the Accords. Do not make me have you arrested.”

Twisting to glare at the man, Tony had the overwhelming urge to punch him. He’d forgotten what an arrogant prick the man was. He was looking forward to taking him down, something he had not dared to do before because of how much power had been bestowed upon Ross once the Accords had been signed.

They were not law yet.

“Have the Accords been made law yet, Secretary Ross?” Tony asked sweetly. “I would not be breaking the law by leaving. Talking to the Avengers? I wasn’t prohibited from doing so. How do you expect us to consider the Accords if the majority of the team are not involved in the ratifying of it? Or were you hoping the less time they had to read them, the more chance you had of bringing them into line under yourself?” Because that was Secretary Ross’s play. He wanted the Avengers under his control. Tony wasn’t going to allow him to succeed this time. “How do you expect the rest of the Avengers to accept the Accords as they are when they are hardly given any time to consider them and request changes?”

“The wording of the legislation does not concern them. They will follow the law or be arrested or retire,” stated Ross harshly.

“Thaddeus, stop making a fool of yourself and sit down!” Laura Templar spoke up, her eyes peering over her round glasses. “We all agreed the Avengers should be given access to the Accords before the signing date. If Mr. Stark had followed your plan of introducing them three days before the selected signing date, problems could have been created. This way we can still debate them and discuss any concerns the Avengers may have.”

Tony inclined his head. “Thank you, Miss Templar.”

Ross glowered at them.

Tony knew he wasn’t going to like what happened next. Ross would fight him every step of the way. But this time he had Natasha with him to back him up. “Much as you may not like it, Ross, I do not work for you.”

“Yet.”

“Clearly you are not the right man for the job,” stated Natasha. There was anger glittering in her eyes.

“I have been appointed by the President himself!” roared Thaddeus, his face becoming redder.

“You have it in for us based on some of the legislation you proposed, Secretary,” swallowed Tony, shifting the papers out of the folder he had brought with him. He cast his gaze around the room.
“Rhodey has already agreed to sign the Accords as has Vision and Wanda Maximoff has made a provisional guarantee to sign. However, the other members of the team are more apprehensive about some of the legislation proposed within the Accords themselves. Natasha and I would like to discuss with you today about potential changes to the Accords which would then enable Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson agree to sign and work with the governments of the world.”

Ross’s lips were twitching and it was clear he wanted to say no however the other five representatives seemed happy to listen.

Tony passed his notes over to Natasha who took up the discussion.

“The tracking bracelets are a no from the Avengers,” she began. “It violates our rights of freedom and none of us will consent to be tracked twenty-four seven. Perhaps if we are considered dangerous because of something we may have contributed to in our efforts to save the world, it may be up for discussion, however, it is not legal for us, as heroes, to be tracked at all times.”

“And those with powers like Miss Maximoff?” enquired Georgianna.

“She has abilities which need to be tracked,” added Sergio Ballard.

Ross looked smug.

Tony smiled. He had a plan. “Easy. She’s human. All of us are. She doesn’t need to be tracked. She needs to be given the chance to learn to use them in a safe and controlled environment. Wanda has agreed if she needs to be tracked she will consent to it, but only in the event, she is under investigation or it has been proven she is dangerous, neither of which occur currently.”

“She may have done questionable things in the past,” interrupted Natasha, “but so have I. Should I not be tracked too?”

“You do not have super-powers, Ms. Romanoff,” pointed out Marcel Kech. “The two cases are entirely different.”

“If we start tracking people with powers they may feel less inclined to help us in our hour of need.” Tony cast a glance at Natasha before turning his attention back to the committee. “Put it this way, how would you feel if you were in Wanda’s position and were told you had to be tracked at all times just because you have powers?”

“It’s for the greater good.” Ross folded his arms over his chest, stubborn as always.

However, the response from the other five members was more positive.

“It wouldn’t be fair to be feared for our powers,” confirmed Sergio.

“I think we can agree most of us, that the permanent tracking bracelets can be altered to only be used when an Avenger or an enhanced individual is under investigation and it is legally required for them to be monitored,” suggested Laura. “Do we have a consensus? If we do we can take this suggestion back to our respective continents and gain feedback on whether this change would be acceptable to the governments around the world.”

The rest of her companions muttered agreement, even Ross did, though he didn’t look happy.

“There are two other areas of the Accords which require some changes,” continued Natasha. “The second part is about detaining us indefinitely without trial. That is illegal and breaks our human rights. None of us can sanction the Accords fully with that in place. I understand that a particular
piece of legislation is unpopular among many of the countries involved with the Accords. Is that correct?”

“It is,” Afolabi Adebayo confirmed. He glanced at his companions. “We all disagreed with the motion Thaddeus put forth. He was insistent on including it.”

“Of course he did,” muttered Tony. “He’s intent on controlling us. I think we can agree to remove that piece of legislation.”

“Or alter it so you are only detained pending trial if the situation warrants being put in jail, otherwise house arrest should do,” suggested Laura wisely. “If that is the case, monitoring would be required at all times to ensure house arrest is not broken. Do you agree?”

“We would have to discuss it with the other Avengers,” explained Tony, “but I feel certain it may be something they will agree to. They do know they will have to compromise if any changes are to be made to the Accords.”

“Excellent. Do you have any other queries relating to the Accords, Mr. Stark?” Sergio asked.

This meeting was going better than expected though Secretary Ross’s face was still not looking happy. He was losing control of the Avengers by the minute.

“There is one other thing we require clarification upon,” started Tony quietly. “We all agree we need to seek permission to cross into other countries, but what if there is a world-ending threat and we do not have time to ask for permission? By not attacking when we have the intelligence could lead to more deaths. How do we go about it?”

“I would believe it to be obvious, Stark,” said Ross. “You ask for permission regardless of what the outcome would be.”

“And if people died because we had to wait?” Natasha asked, her eyes burning steadily at Ross.

“Collateral damage.”

“Wow,” whistled Tony. “You’d rather people died than be saved? Isn’t the whole point of the Accords to prevent people from dying?”

“Mr. Stark has a point, Thaddeus…” Marcel indicated. “This is a discussion I have already been having with officials. If there is such a threat, which is a high risk to life, then they would be happy for the Avengers to intervene, before permission is granted, providing of course they have been notified in advance of what this threat is so they can provide assistance if needed. All the Avengers would need to do is communicate on-route. If they decide the Avengers are not required they would request the Avengers to leave.” Marcel’s bright green eyes turned towards Tony and Natasha and she shook her head slightly to move a bit of hair out of her face. “Would the Avengers retreat if asked? If the government wanted to handle the situation on their own?”

Tony bit his lower lip. “I would. I cannot say for the others.”

“Like Captain America,” intoned Thaddeus Ross. “He finds it difficult to follow orders, doesn’t he? Prefers to give them rather than obey.”

Tony wasn’t going to rise to the bait. “I think it would depend on the situation at hand. If it was a threat only we could deal with and we were being pulled out, I would find it difficult to leave knowing it would be better for me to be out there fighting. I think the main point here is that if we do have to enter a country without permission to prevent a world-ending threat, we wouldn’t have
repercussions for our actions in doing so. We would be just trying to do the right thing.”

“Agreed. In world-ending threats the Avengers should not face any punishment for attempting to help,” backed Afolabi. “It is the smaller missions which are not world-ending threats that we would prefer to have some element of control over.”

“That we can agree on,” smiled Natasha. “But we do need to have a firm answer on whether we can still act legally in world-ending situations. Hopefully, they would be few and far in between but we cannot deny that we have had our fair share of them.”

Laura cleared her throat. “As far as I am aware, the general consensus among Europe is if it is a world-ending threat they are happy for the Avengers to intervene without notification, providing of course at the end they stay and help with the clear-up and provide statements both to the governments and the Accords committee. We would then determine if permission should have been granted prior to your intervention. But this would just be a formality. We would prefer to trust the Avengers to act when they need to without permission.” She cast her gaze around, avoiding Secretary Ross’s burning eyes. “I think we can all agree world-ending threats would be allowed to be acted upon without due authorisation?”

There was muttering from around them, all of them agreeing to the clarification Tony sought.

Tony smiled. “If these changes can be implemented into the final version of the Accords, you will have a deal with the Avengers to work under the Accords and with the United Nations.” He and Natasha rose from their chairs. “Thank you for your time to listen to our requests and consider them all.”

All apart from Ross said farewell as they left the chamber.

Once outside, Tony smirked. “Ross is not happy, is he?”

“No,” grinned Natasha. “He’s losing his power.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if the others requested a new appointment to his position. He is rather… unstable. I hope the changes we asked for will be implemented. On the day of the signing, before we sign the official document, we will need to check to make sure Ross hasn’t tampered with it.”

“Would he dare?”

“He would. He wants the Avengers under his control. What we’ve done is strip power away from him. He’ll be gunning for us both, Nat.”

“Let him try,” she replied darkly. “He won’t win.”

Tony grimaced. “We’ll see. Steve should at least accept the Accords now. We’ve requested the changes and hopefully part one of our plans has worked. We’ll keep the team together for Thanos.”

Natasha sighed. “Once they are signed we have to start preparing for him.”

“We do… we do.” Good thing he was already thinking about it.

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On the way back to the Compound, Tony received two messages. “Pepper is at the Compound. And I’ve just been sent this.” He passed his phone over to Natasha.
On the screen was a video of a masked individual swinging through New York, stopping a bus from rolling over and bringing it to a stop.

“Peter?”

“Yep,” Tony confirmed. “I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“Are you bringing him into the Avengers?”

“Soon.” Tony took his phone back. “I want to be involved in his life, Nat. He meant a lot to me. But… I’m not sure whether to get close or not.”

She laid a hand on his arm. “Do it. But do things differently this time. His Aunt found out about his secret identity, right?”

Tony nodded. “She did.”

“Recruit him to the Avengers but tell her. Spider-Man may only be a teenager but we need as many heroes as possible if we are to counter-act Thanos.”

“The kid is going nowhere near Thanos again,” stated Tony darkly.

Natasha cocked her head to the side. “If you want that, you cannot get involved with him.”

Tony groaned. “Damn it, Nat.” He put his phone back in his pocket. “I’ll talk to his Aunt. I cannot not have him in my life.”

---

Pepper was waiting in the common room when Tony and Natasha returned. Her long hair fell about her shoulders and she wore a shirt and skirt, having dressed down for the occasion. She was surprised to see them both there.

“Hi Pep,” smiled Tony. “Good day?”

“The usual when you are running a world-successful business,” she answered. “What do you want to talk to me about Tony?”

Tony exchanged a glance with Natasha. They had already discussed how best to start this out. There was no point leading up to the reveal that they were both from the future. It was better to just come out and say it. He’d already ensured all recording equipment was switched off and none of the other Avengers were currently in the Compound so they were unlikely to be disturbed or overheard.

Tony scratched the back of his head. “I’m not sure how to go about and say this, Pep, so I’m just going to come out and say it. Nat and I… we’re from the future.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!
So, Steve is willing to compromise on the Accords. Zemo is looking for the red book to control the Winter Soldier with and Tony and Nat cannot interfere until Zemo has committed a crime. All they can do is have him followed. Ross wants to control the Avengers but is being stopped by Tony and Natasha.

It's never really revealed what the committee of the Accords would be so I decided to make it up a bit, have a person represent each of the six different continents who then liaise with the respective governments on the Avengers behalf. Antarctica is the seventh continent but no one lives there so doesn't require representation at the moment. Ross is representing North America which is why he is on the panel.

Peter has sort of made his debut in this story. Tony is currently watching out for him via Friday monitoring him from public cameras.

Up next: Tony and Natasha talk with Pepper. Will be posted next Sunday!

the-writer1988
Chapter Six: Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

Tony and Pepper have a much-needed chat.

Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter today because I wanted a chapter dedicated to Tony and Pepper’s talk. The next chapter will be longer. I’m still estimating another few more chapters to go before we are done with the Civil War storyline. Thank you everyone for the feedback so far!

And, special thanks goes to JediPanda22 for the fantastic art they have done for this chapter which is posted at the bottom. Please check out the rest of their art for various fandoms on their instagram account found here: https://www.instagram.com/jedipanda22/

Please enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SIX

Reconciliation

Friday 13th May 2016

Tony scratched the back of his head. “I’m not sure how to go about and say this, Pep, so I’m just going to come out and say it. Nat and I… we’re from the future.”

“Have you been drinking?” Pepper leaned forward and then back, her eyes opening suspiciously, watching the both of them with her sharp gaze. “Because you generally only say stupid things when you are drunk.”

“To be fair he says stupid things when he isn’t drunk too,” interjected Natasha.

Tony threw her a look. “Not helping,” he whispered. Returning his attention to Pepper, he continued: “I’m not drunk. I’m completely sane.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow.

“Ok, maybe not completely sane… We both know I’m a bit crazy…” he admitted. “The point is… I’m not lying to you. I am from the future. As is Nat.”

“You asked me here for this?” Pepper shook her head in despair. “Tony… if you think pretending you are from the future is going to repair what’s happened between us, you’ve got –”
“I can prove it.” This wasn’t going the way he expected. He couldn’t lose Pepper in his second chance. Maybe it was too soon to try to get her back. Maybe he should have waited to talk to her. But knowing what their endgame was made him want to spend as much time with her as possible.

*It won’t be your endgame if you do things right…*

The voice reverberated inside his head, attempting to comfort him, to waylay his fears of what the future could still hold for him and Pepper.

“You’re scared,” she whispered. “You’re trembling. Why?” Her voice was soft and soothing, comforting him, despite the worry he felt at potentially losing her.

“I am,” admitted Tony, something he rarely did. “I’m scared you won’t believe me.”

“Time travel… really?” she asked dubiously, tipping her head forward and raising an eyebrow in question.

Tony shrugged. “I was going to invent it one day.”

Pepper stepped back, her eyes moving from Tony to Natasha and then back to Tony. “I’m not sure…”

“It’s the truth, Pepper,” reassured Natasha. “Tony isn’t lying. We are both from the future. Maybe he should have built up to the reveal instead of dropping a bit of a bombshell on yourself? This isn’t something we would lie to you about.”

Pepper patted the seat beside her. She still looked unsure. “Tony, sit with me, please.”

Tony moved across the room to sit beside her, his body trembling. “Pep…”

She raised a finger and pressed it on his lips. “I need to ask you something.” She shuffled slightly in her seat but kept her eyes upon Tony’s. “Are we married in the future?”

Tony nodded, staying quiet. He wondered what Pepper was up to.

“Then if we are married then you will know something about me that I vowed to tell only to one person and that was to the man I would marry. I would tell them the night before our wedding. If you truly are from the future you will know what I am talking about as I would have told you.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Natasha piped up.

Pepper peered over Tony’s shoulder and shook her head. “No. You should stay.”

Tony knew what she was talking about. What she had trusted him with a day before their wedding. He hadn’t blamed her from keeping it from him all these years, he’d understood. It was something that even he with his large amount of resources would never have known about. The connection wasn’t obvious. It had been a tragedy for Pepper to have suffered so young. One which had turned her cold and had made herself determined to find a place in the world where she didn’t have to get close to anyone…

Yet Tony had managed to crawl his way into her heart… They’d been dancing around one another for years until they had finally gotten together. They’d been denying the inevitable.

“Tony?” probed Pepper carefully.

Sighing, Tony took her hands in his, squeezing them gently. “You told me a secret you’ve kept for
years and that you would only reveal a day before our wedding day. It is a secret that you wanted to keep and by telling me then you were searching for trust. To know that I still wanted to marry you even though you’d kept this secret from me for years.” He remembered it well: Pepper informing him she had something to tell him, a secret she had kept from him and one where, she said, if he decided not to marry her after knowing then she would understand. Tony had still married her, understanding her desire to keep it secret, keep it quiet.

Pepper swallowed.

“You told me when you were fourteen you were orphaned. You’ve never allowed yourself to get close to people since the fire,” began Tony quietly.

She breathed out.

“It happened by accident but the consequences were severe for you. You survived but no one else did. You were the one to raise the alarm. You woke up in the middle of the night and smelt smoke. You told me how you ran to your parent’s room and roused them from their sleep. The smoke was already thick, suffocating you all. Your dad smashed the window of their bedroom, told you to jump and they would follow once they got your younger sister. You jumped out, landed and broke your wrist and ankle in the process. You couldn’t move. You were crying and in pain… Your whole house was in flames. Your parents were at the window with your younger sister.” There were tears forming in Pepper’s eyes. He wanted to stop, to not harm her anymore. But she hadn’t asked him too. “But then there was an explosion. The whole upper floor of your home collapsed, taking your sister and your parents with it. They died then. You were the only survivor and you hated it, hated surviving because you could have got your sister before going to your parents. You could have all lived and you blamed yourself for their deaths. But there was nothing you could have done. Since then you’ve been on your own, determined to work hard, to prove to the world that you survived for a reason. But you always refused to allow anyone to get close to you. You had boyfriends but you were afraid of letting them get too close to you in case you lost them. And then you met me. You were so difficult to read, to get close to. You worked hard, determined to succeed. You never let me get close to you. I always used to have my way with my Personal Assistants but, Pep, you were not a push-over. I took you seriously, and I got to know you, respect you and learned to love you legitimately. And… I think it took you years to trust me, to get close to me, to have feelings for me because of what you had survived. You fell in love with me over many years but you were still afraid to lose me like you lost your parents and your sister.”

And then I died anyway, he thought, realising all of Pepper’s fears had come true. He had left her. But he couldn’t tell her that.

“Tony…” A slight smile tugged at her lips. One tear slipped down her cheek. “There is only one way you could have known about the fire…”

“Do you believe me now?” he asked quietly.

Pepper nodded. “I swore to only tell you once… And I know I’ve never said anything about it to you. The only way for you to know is if we were going to get married… And, I’m sure I’d remember marrying you.”

“So…” Tony urged, waiting for confirmation.

“I believe you.” She glanced at Natasha. “But I have no way of testing Natasha to determine if she is really from the future. All I can do is trust you, Tony, and I do.”

A weight lifted from his shoulders. Pepper believed him.
But she pulled back, her eyes searching his, looking for something he was sure wasn’t there. “Why have you come back? And… wait… does this mean there are two of you?”

“No,” Tony said instantly. “We didn’t do the traditional time-travel of hopping into a machine and coming out in history. There are not two versions of us running around. I… went to sleep in my future… and woke up back here.” It was a semblance of truth. Dying had felt like falling asleep… only losing awareness completely and being unable to breathe. He had known he was dying, had felt the life slowly leaving his body. “The best way to describe it is….”

Souls. Your souls moved backward in time.

Tony paused, eyes widening at the voice in his head.

A quick glance at Natasha told him she had heard the same thing.

“Tony?” Pepper prodded, noticing their simultaneous reactions.

Tell her about the voice you hear.

Natasha swallowed, moved slowly and sat down on the table in front of the sofa Tony and Pepper were sitting on.

“Souls. The best way to describe it is our souls moved back in time and inhabited our old bodies. We merged with our past selves, bringing all our knowledge of the future to the here and now,” explained Natasha. “We do not know why we were chosen to come back, only that we have to stop things from playing out as they did before. Something… bad occurred which Tony and I wish to prevent. We need to keep the team together and working on the Accords is the best step forward.”

“I think I understand,” said Pepper. “You’re still the same person only with memories from a life you’ve already lived. Sort of like Vision? He remembers being JARVIS but now he is sentient, alive. But… how did your souls get back? What about your bodies in the future? Did you die?”

“Honestly? We don’t know. We both woke up here,” admitted Tony, knowing he couldn’t tell Pepper the full truth. He didn’t want to worry her. Maybe one day he would but right now wasn’t the right time to tell her that he and Natasha had died in their future. “But we both hear a voice. Whatever is responsible for sending us back is with us. It guides us, hints to us as to what decisions to make. You saw me look at Nat. That was the voice talking to us.”

“It just spoke into our minds about our souls moving back in time,” confirmed Natasha.

Pepper swallowed. “I guess this means you won’t be giving up being Iron Man?”

Tony lowered his chin against his chest and took a deep breath. “I can’t. Not just yet. Not while I still have to make sure the future I come from doesn’t happen.” He looked up. “But once this is done, I will retire. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“What if you die before you can retire?” Pepper asked sadly.

It was always a possibility he would still die. Tony knew that. “I can’t promise to come home.” After last time, he couldn’t. When he’d left to go on the Time Heist, Tony had had a feeling he wouldn’t see his home again, just a niggle of doubt, as if he knew his time was up. He’d been proven right. He’d never promised Pepper he’d come home safe. She had known the risks, let him go, and knowing she could lose him forever. And Morgan… God, Morgan…

He hoped the voice would tell him otherwise but he was met with silence.
“Then if I am to die then I want to spend whatever time I have left with you. If you let me…” She deserved to have the choice to walk away. “I’ll be alright if you choose not to be with me.”

“Tony…” Pepper’s shoulders slumped. She looked weary and tired. “This last month since we decided to take a break has been difficult for me. I’ve missed you. Thought about you every single day and I’ve been tempted to pick up the phone just to hear your voice. I demand a lot from you. I expect a lot from you and I know I can be very overbearing sometimes but I love you. I know giving up the Iron Man suit is a lot to ask…”

Tony twirled his fingers together with hers. “I will always be Iron Man, Pepper. Nothing can take that identity away from me. I’ve been given a second chance. Both Nat and I have, I can’t sit back and let things happen again, not when it is in our power to do so.”

“We have a mission to accomplish before either of us can rest,” added Natasha. “We didn’t come back together. I’ve been here a tiny bit longer than Tony has. He only arrived recently. We found one another quickly enough.”

Pepper nodded thoughtfully. “Have you changed anything, apart from telling me, of course?” she added as an afterthought.

“Yes. Lagos. I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Pepper gasped. “MIT speech. You cancelled on them. I received the notification you had done so.”

“I had to be in Lagos to prevent something worse from happening. It worked. Lagos was the start of it, where everything started to go wrong originally. It started a chain reaction which resulted in a catastrophic event. The Avengers were not together. We broke apart…”

Natasha continued. “Being apart was one of the reasons we lost.”

“The Accords were the driving force which split us,” revealed Tony. “Now it will be the legislation which will keep us together. For us to function as a team we have to follow the Accords, especially if we want to be ready for what’s coming. Facing it together with the world is better than trying to fight it apart where failure is more certain.”

Leaning back in the sofa, Pepper sighed.

“What is it?” asked Tony, his eyes studying her beautiful face.

She squeezed his hand. “I’ll help you,” whispered Pepper.

Tony was taken back. “What?” He was surprised but the feeling of happiness burst through him at her words.

“I know you are not telling me everything. Guess there are rules you have to follow. “

“There are,” Tony confirmed. Rules stymied him but he recognised the importance of them in this situation. He simply couldn’t tell Pepper he’d died, though he suspected she might already have that inkling of doubt.

“You’ve been truthful, not kept me in the dark. Coming clean when you didn’t have to? It shows me you care and you want to make this work. I’m willing to try again.”

Tony’s face split into a broad smile. “Pep…” He moved quickly, joy running through his body, as he pulled her close, hugging her and burying his head in her shoulder. He wanted to cry because he
had one part of his life back.

Moving her face, Pepper kissed him on the lips, pulling him down.

Natasha stood hastily from her perch on the table. “I think I should leave.”

Tony broke out into laughter as Pepper drew away from him. “We’re not going to do anything…”

“Yet,” Pepper’s eyes sparkled.

“Oh.” Tony’s eyes widened.

“Later, Mr. Stark,” teased Pepper. Leaning back, Pepper moved her gaze over to Natasha. “I’m assuming the others do not know of… this?”

“No.” Natasha shook her head. “We do not plan on telling them. I don’t think the voice would let us.”

“It told us to trust you though,” admitted Tony quietly. “I guess it knew doing so would reconcile us.”

“Tony…” Pepper smiled sadly. “I didn’t want to go on a break. But I needed time to revaluate and I realised I can’t be living my life without you.”

A lop-sided smile pulled at Tony’s lips. “Guess we’re stuck with one another, aye Potts?”

Pepper squeezed his hands. “Fortunately for us, we are.” She leaned in and kissed him on the lips. “What happens now?”

“Tony and I will continue with what we’re doing, ensuring the safe passage of the Accords and keeping the Avengers together,” explained Natasha.

“We’re also tracing a man named Helmut Zemo who is responsible for a terrorist attack which is due to happen soon,” continued Tony. “Unfortunately, we cannot act until he’s committed a crime and so far he hasn’t but FRIDAY is keeping tabs on him. We’ll be ready to act as soon as we receive notification.” He hesitated then, unsure whether to take the risk.

Pepper noticed. “What is it?”

“There’s this kid, where I came from, who became a big part of my life. It’s around this time I met him… He changed me for the better. I’m debating whether to go ahead and put myself in his life when the situation which forced me to go to him in the first place shouldn’t happen now…” Tony had been considering whether to leave Peter out of everything. Keep him safe by not getting to know him.

“How much did he mean to you?” Pepper queried quietly.

“He died in my arms and it broke me, Pep. He’s got powers, and he has the potential to be one of the greatest superheroes of the world… I took him under my wing but one mistake I made was not telling his Aunt about his after-school activities. She did find out though and she accepted my role in his life. He’s fifteen.”

Pepper swallowed. “I think if he means so much to you, you need to be involved. Maybe mentoring him previously made him a better superhero. Don’t cut him out of your life.”

“Tony, we’ll need him. We’ll need as many people to fight as possible. At least with us he’ll have
the right training and will not come blundering in unprepared,” suggested Natasha.

Tony sighed. “I want to keep him safe. Everyone I love safe. But I know it is not possible.”

“We’ll do the best we can.” Natasha glanced at Pepper. “But what I believe is most important to the future we are trying to build is you two. The voice wouldn’t have told us to trust Pepper if she didn’t play a pivotal role in what was to come next.”

It was perhaps an interesting statement and one development Tony hadn’t considered. I should have seen it. Pepper has always been pivotal to everything I do. Why would it be different this time?

“Trust,” Pepper murmured, “that’s what is important. Trust one another and we can’t fail.”

The only issue now towards trust was the difference in the Accords and whether the rest of the team would support them. Tony worried their efforts would be for nothing. “Then let us believe the others will trust us and help us keep the Avengers together.”

Natasha smiled gently. “I don’t know why but I believe they will.”

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

Pepper is going to be important throughout this story. It is never fully revealed where Pepper's family are. The only indication we have is in Iron Man 1 she tells Tony he is the only thing she has which suggests to me she has no family. I had two options to go with for how to convince Pepper of the truth. My original idea was using BARF and Tony shows her some memories but those memories can be manipulated as demonstrated in Civil War when Tony showed MIT students the last time he saw his
parents alive and then altered the memory. I then decided to explore Pepper's background and decided to go with a tragic event which caused Pepper to lose her family at a young age and not want to talk about it because she blames herself. Hence her decision to only tell someone before they got married, as a test to see if they still wanted to marry her since she kept it from them for so long.

I hope the idea works and I felt it made more sense for Tony to know something about Pepper he wouldn't necessarily know in canon at this point.

The next chapter will move the story forward a bit more as we bring Peter Parker into the story...

Until next Sunday!

the-writer1988
Chapter Seven: Trust

Chapter Summary

Tony and Peter meet!

Chapter Notes

Afternoon everyone! Here is your weekly update. Peter Parker arrives in the story! I know you have all been waiting for his appearance... This chapter will move the story forward a bit more. The next few chapters are going to be quite fast-paced as we near the end of the Civil War Arc.

Thank you for all the comments so far. Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVEN

Trust

Friday 20th May 2016

Queens

A week later, Tony asked Happy to drive him to Queens where he intended to bring Peter Parker into the fold. He’d thought long and hard about how to approach the subject. There was no need for him to take the kid to Germany now. If things worked out the way they were supposed to, the airport fight wouldn’t be happening. But the kid still had superpowers and was quickly becoming more and more noticeable in the media, especially with the multiple YouTube videos that were popping up online.

It was time for Tony to step in. Only this time, Aunt May would be informed of Peter’s identity. She had supported her nephew when she had found out the true nature of Peter’s internship with Stark Industries, though she hadn’t been too happy about Tony Stark keeping the secret from her. She had slightly relented when Peter had told her he had asked Mr. Stark to keep the secret.

Now everything was different.

Tony’s first priority was to safeguard Peter. He could simply just walk away and leave the kid to it, but no matter what, the kid would still get involved. For instance, the Vulture was operating in the vicinity, another man Tony was keeping an eye on, waiting for the right time to take him down. He could just as easily shut down the Vulture’s operations now but he had a good reason not to. His priority at the moment was sorting the Accords. After that, Tony had a few years to prepare for Thanos, in which he could turn his attention elsewhere.
Right now, it was Peter.

The car pulled to a stop outside an apartment building. He knew the Peter and May would be moving soon as their lease was due to run out and wouldn’t be renewed. He’d had to remember which apartment to go to.

“We’re here, boss,” said Happy.

“Thanks,” said Tony, getting out of the car. “Wait here. I won’t be too long.”

Taking a side entrance, not wanting to be seen, Tony took the emergency exit stairs, disabling the alarms with FRIDAY and ran up the stairs to reach the sixth floor. The hallway was deserted.

Perfect.

Knocking on apartment twenty-three, Tony waited, feeling a bit nervous. He heard footsteps from beyond the door and May opened it, eyes widening as she saw who was at her doorstep.

“Hi, Ms Parker, Tony Stark, may I come in?” He tried his best to appear genuine, flashing a smile at her as he held out his hand for her to shake.

“To…Tony Stark? The Tony Stark?” She extended her own hand and shook his. “I think… you’ve got the wrong apartment.”

“No, definitely the right one. Peter Parker lives here, right?”

“Yes…” She stepped aside, allowing him to enter the apartment, shutting the door behind him.

“Is he here?” he asked.

“What do you want with him?” she asked carefully, her shock at seeing Tony Stark on her doorstep was wearing off and the colour was returning to her cheeks.

“Just a talk. He’s very smart for his age and I have an internship I’d like to offer him, if he’s interested and you are agreeable to it, of course?” Best way to play this. Keep the internship intact. Peter needed it to so he could reach his full potential.

“How… how did you know about him? He’s just a normal kid.”

Oh, if Aunt May knew he wasn’t just a normal kid.

Well, she’d find out today anyway as Tony intended on revealing to her Peter’s abilities, even if the kid did not want it. A part of him worried doing so would prevent Peter coming to trust him and getting close to him. Peter didn’t know it would work out. Tony had the foresight to know Aunt May would be very supportive of her nephew.

“As part of Stark Industries recruitment drive, we contact all the schools in the area to determine which students may benefit from an internship. It is a programme which has been going on for a while. I do not personally get involved very often, however Peter’s potential was flagged up to me as one to watch, and I figured it would be beneficial to meet with him, to discuss his future career options.”

“Oh…” May seem surprised. “He always has been a smart kid. I’ll go get him, shall I?”

“Please,” replied Tony.
“Take a seat, Mr. Stark.” She pointed to the couch. “I’ll be right back.”

He watched her leave, feeling a bit nervous at the prospect of seeing Peter again and the kid not knowing or fully understanding how much he meant to Tony.

May returned quite quickly with a teenaged boy behind her, his round face surprised at the presence of Tony Stark in his living room.

“Mr. Stark, this is Peter. Peter, Tony Stark.”

Tony stretched forward, holding his hand out to Peter. The boy took it, shaking Tony’s hand.

“My aunt tells me you’d like to offer me an internship?” asked Peter, his voice shaking a bit.

“I do,” confirmed Tony. “You have unique skills Stark Industries and the Avengers would be interested in.” He emphasised the word Avengers, hoping the kid would understand the meaning.

He did because his eyes widened, but he tried to maintain his cool.

“I think… think you’ve got the wrong person, Mr. Stark. I’m not sure I can help you… And I do not have any skills which would benefit the Avengers either…”

Tony smiled. “Nonsense. You can. I know you can. I have proof.” He held up his phone.

Peter squeaked which caused Aunt May to look at him in surprise.

“What’s going on, Peter?” she asked.

“Can I talk to you… alone? Mr. Stark?”

“If your Aunt is fine with it…” Tony gave the ball over to May.

“Sure… that’s fine.” Though she did look a bit worried.

Tony followed Peter to his room.

As soon as the door was closed, Peter sat on the edge of the bed, fiddling with his fingers, determining what the best question would be.

“You’re probably wondering why I am here,” said Tony quietly, already guessing what the kid’s question would be.

“Yeah.”

Tony pulled out his phone, flipped it and projected a video of a kid swinging through New York. “That’s you. Isn’t it?”

“No!” Peter replied too quickly. “It’s just a home-made video.”

Glancing up at the ceiling, Tony pointed up with his finger. “If I opened the small loft space you’ve got up there, I wouldn’t find a suit then?” He knew it was where Peter kept it hidden.

Peter’s face paled. “Erm…”

“Kid, I’m here to help you.” Tony continued gently. “I know who you are and what you can do. I’ll open the loft if I have to.”
“Please don’t! Just… don’t tell Aunt May. She’ll freak out!”

Tony winced. He’d agreed with that condition before but he couldn’t this time. “Sorry, your Aunt needs to know.” May had been angry at first, then scared for her nephew but then had accepted Peter’s new role as the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man. He didn’t see any reason why she wouldn’t be supportive this time.

“She’ll ground me!” Peter protested.

“She won’t.”

“You don’t know that!”

Tony wanted to laugh but Peter was becoming more and more agitated, so he sat down on the edge of Peter’s bed. “I’m trying to help you. You underestimate your Aunt. Look, I need your help and I cannot have it on my conscience if something happened to you and your Aunt could never know the truth. Sometimes it is best to let go of our pride. The people who love us will understand.” Because Pepper did despite the continual fears she had he’d kill himself. Tony hoped to avoid that outcome.

“What do you need me for?” asked Peter quietly. “Mr. Stark?”

“There are things I need you to do for me.”

“Call me, Tony,” he smiled gently. He could just recall Peter saying ‘Tony’ in a broken voice. The kid had been devastated at seeing Tony’s wounds. If Tony could have spared Peter from seeing it, he would have done. It felt good to be talking to Peter again, even though the relationship they’d once had was no longer there. It would take time to build up again but Tony hoped Peter could come to trust him again. “You have superpowers, unique abilities we could use. We need people like you on the Avengers.”

“You want me to join the Avengers?” Peter gasped, his eyes widening in surprise and his mouth hanging open. He struggled to close it in his shock.

“No, not just yet. You need training,” reaffirmed Tony. The kid’s face deflated a bit. “You wouldn’t be allowed on the team without sufficient training and knowledge of certain protocols. You’d be on the reserve team, to be called up if we desperately needed you. But that isn’t all. I’m serious about an internship: a genuine offer to you to come and work for me. But, the catch is, your Aunt May has to know the full truth.”

Peter swallowed. “If I said no would you still tell her?”

“I feel as the adult in this room it would be my moral duty to inform her,” replied Tony carefully.

Peter’s shoulders dropped. “Either way, she’s going to find out.”

“She’ll find out eventually. Isn’t it better for her to know the truth?” Tony studied Peter. He could see him considering the options Tony had given him, already knowing Tony would not be leaving Aunt May out of it.

“I guess…”

Tony leaned forward. “It doesn’t have to be today. I’m not going to push for an answer just yet.” He still had time. “Think about it.” He pulled a card out of his pocket, passing it to Peter. “My number. Call me.”

---
Steve was waiting for him when Tony returned to the Compound, making his way towards his office. Surprised to see him there, Tony made himself comfortable on the chair, whilst Steve leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, looking across at him.

“This isn’t about the Accords,” started Steve. “It’s something else. Something I should have told you years ago…”

Ah, my parents.

Tony was surprised. At least he was assuming it was about Bucky.

“But I need to know something first…” Steve was hesitant.

Tony could guess. “They want to bring the Winter Soldier in, Steve. If they ever need to go after him, they will only kill if they have to but it will not be their first option.”

“It shouldn’t be an option at all,” stated Steve.

“And if he kills people because he’s been activated? There is a way out there to control him but we do not have it in our hands,” replied Tony carefully. I hope we get the Red Book soon before Zemo gets his hands on it.

“Bucky shouldn’t be punished for the actions of other people into forcing him to do things he doesn’t want to do,” argued Steve, pointing out the obvious.

“I know that, Steve, but what if he was on the brink of destroying a whole city with a push of the button and the only way out was to shoot him dead? What would you do? Sacrifice a whole city on the off-chance you could save your friend? How would Bucky Barnes take it if he found out you chose his life over thousands of others?” Tony leaned forward. Steve couldn’t be this close-minded. “I know he is your friend but sometimes we have to make difficult choices, no matter how much it hurts us, just to save the world.”

“I’d choose the city…” Steve admitted quietly.

Tony wasn’t sure Steve was sincere in his answer. His experiences before coloured his view of Steve. Steve had prioritised Bucky over the safety of the general public. He’d been misled into believing there was a kill order for Bucky. Sharon Carter had been misled by Thaddeus Ross. The soldiers in Bucharest had not gone in with kill orders. They’d been told to bring the Winter Soldier in for questioning, but if necessary were to kill if he resisted arrest.

Sharon’s bad advice to Steve had caused the whole mess in the first place.

But that deception hadn’t happened yet and hopefully wouldn’t.

“Tony…” Steve asked quietly. “How did you know I was going to ask about the Winter Soldier?”

“I read the Hydra files, Steve. There is a lot of information on the Winter Soldier out there. It is all in the public domain. However, there are still some things from the Hydra files that have yet to be decrypted. I’m sure all their secrets will come out eventually. I know what Bucky Barnes means to you and I promise you I will do everything in my power to protect him.” Tony meant that. Despite what Barnes had done to his parents, he hadn’t carried out the task willingly. He’d had no choice and Tony had accepted it. It didn’t mean he should condemn the man who had carried it out.
Steve bowed his head, almost in shame. “I’m not sure you will still want to protect him after I tell you what I need to.”

Tony swallowed. So this was about his parents.

“I’m telling you this because we need to trust one another and stay together. The Accords are trying to split us because we have different views about them but if we are to stay together I have to be truthful and not keep secrets. I’ve kept this from you for longer than I should have done and I’m sorry for it. I was afraid of your reaction.”

“Steve?” Tony proceeded cautiously. “You can trust me.”

“I know.” Steve raised his head, took a deep breath and said: “The Winter Soldier murdered your parents.”

Steve had said it. He’d come out and said what Tony had wanted to hear. Steve was trying to build bridges, build the trust between them that should have always been there.

“Ok,” replied Tony.

“Okay?” Steve looked at him suspiciously. “You already knew?”

Tony shrugged. “As I said, the Hydra files leaked onto the internet. It was within them. I did a search for ‘Stark’ and it gave me all the information Hydra had on me and my parents. I didn’t know you knew though. How long have you known? Originally, Tony had never made that specific search into the Hydra files, deciding he didn’t want to know what was there. But this had been one of the algorithms he had been searching for since coming back in time. He wanted to know what Hydra had on him.

Steve winced. “When I was at the old training base during the brief time I was on the run, I found out there. Armin Zola told me. He showed me newspaper cuttings of Howard’s death and how it had been made to look like an accident. He implied the Winter Soldier was responsible. I figured Bucky was the one to kill them but I don’t know for sure if he was responsible. I’m telling you this now because I do not want it to become an issue that can be exploited against us later. If you can find out your parents were murdered, others could too.”

They could. It was a risk which Tony could not eliminate unless he had Friday do a deep search of all released Hydra files to find the information and delete it. But there was a lot of information to traverse through. Ultimately the information would become public knowledge. Tony could keep it hidden but he just didn’t want to.

“You’ve known for a while though,” noted Tony. “Took you a while to come and tell me.”

“I know,” replied Steve quietly, his face burning. “I should have told you years ago. Even if I didn’t know who their killer likely was, I still should have told you they had been murdered rather than killed in an accident.”

“It matters you admitted it,” reassured Tony. “Thank you for taking the time to tell me. You can trust me not to go after Barnes. I know he wasn’t of his right mind if he did kill them. It would be bad form if I attempted to kill him for something he didn’t have a choice over.” After the fight in Siberia, Tony had realised he had reacted badly to watching the video of his parents murder and his subsequent attempts to hurt Barnes as much as possible. He wished he could apologise for it, now he never could since the Siberia events would not be happening.

Steve visibly relaxed, as if he had finally released tension which had been holding him back.
“Thanks, Tony.”

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Thursday 2\textsuperscript{nd} June 2016

Tony had a meeting with the President, a request he had put in himself to discuss the Accords and the Avengers concerns over Ross’s appointment to the role. Movement on the changes of the Accords had begun to shift before Ross had clamped down on them and no new progress to legislation changes had been made.

Ross was proving to be problematic for Tony, still attempting to block any changes he and Nat wanted to put through, though the other representatives from the continents were more than happy with the changes. Ross was still able to block them because the panel had to be united in order for changes to be made to the draft document.

This had frustrated Tony’s attempts to get the changes into law before the signing date. He was running out of time to keep the team together.

He pulled a few strings at the White House to get a meeting with the President. He did owe Tony for helping to save his life a few years ago.

“Mr. President.” Tony held out his hand and the President shook it, indicating for him to sit down in front of his desk.

“Mr. Stark,” President Ellis greeted. “It is good to see you again and to hear good reports from the negotiations with the Accords citing your agreement with them.”

“In part,” Tony clarified. “The Accords are what I need to discuss with you.”

President Ellis placed his hands in front of him. “Oh.”

“Specifically it is about the representative for the United States of America,” began Tony cautiously. “I remember your speech when you announced Thaddeus Ross to be our representative on the panel. You wish for the Avengers to collaborate with governments worldwide and yet Thaddeus Ross is the sticking stone to bringing in all the Avengers on the Sokovia Accords. He may have experience with the Hulk but the fact his own involvement in that disaster has been covered up is inherently wrong. Are you aware, Mr. President, that Ross believes Bruce is the property of the Armed Forces? The only reason he is leaving him alone is because the Hulk saved his life, yet he would do anything to be able to control the Hulk. You’re confident he would be able to work with allies abroad and the Avengers, however he is doing everything in his power to block changes the other representatives wish to make. Those changes were brought before the committee by myself and Natasha Romanoff and they were agreed. The rest of the countries took these amendments back to their governments and there is support for them. Has Ross spoken to you about the changes we requested?”

“No… he has not,” the President frowned. “Ross told me the Accords were accepted as they are.”

\textit{That bastard!}

Anger coursed through him. “He’s trying to sabotage the Accords because he doesn’t agree with the changes put forth.”

“What were the changes you requested?” Ellis grabbed pen and paper. “If they are reasonable I will accept them.”
Tony sighed. He hadn’t expected Ross to not take the changes back to the President. No wonder there was a delay in inputting the changes. The President had never been informed. He ran over them in short detail. “The tracking bracelets should only be implemented if there is a requirement for it, not to be tracked constantly from day one of the signing. Secondly, detaining us without trial? That is illegal. We all have a right to a trial if we arrested. Not surprisingly, that was Ross’ specific piece of legislation. A lot of other countries are not happy with it. It was agreed that we could be held if awaiting trial, either in a secure prison or house arrest, depending on the severity of their crimes. And, finally, in the face of world-ending threats, the Avengers should be allowed to intervene without permission, providing we notify the country in advance as we travel there of our intentions.” Tony folded his arms across his chest. “I do not see these as unreasonable changes and these are the three aspects of the Accords which are preventing Steve Rogers from signing.”

“I’m surprised Ross has not brought these to me,” murmured President Ellis. “I agree they do not seem unreasonable. Between you and me, Stark, I have had a few requests from the other representatives to remove Thaddeus from his position. It is finding someone else to fill his shoes.”

“There has to be someone else you trust enough to work with the Avengers and the Accords on a non-bias basis,” suggested Tony.

The President’s eyes clocked on Tony. “How about you, Mr. Stark?”

“Me?” Surprise flickered across his face.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You are an Avenger, Mr. Stark, and a part of the team that has saved the world on numerous occasions. You are a hero to many, respected for the work you do. Perhaps the best way for the Avengers to work with the governments of the world, is to have one on the Accords Committee. And I trust you to make those difficult decisions on whether the Avengers intervention is needed.”

Tony swallowed. He hadn’t been expecting that. “Can I at least think about it?”

“Of course. If you choose to decline, I’m sure I will find someone else. Nevertheless, I shall call Thaddeus today and inform him he will be removed from office, effective immediately.”

It was the most Tony could have hoped for.

“Are you going to take him up on the offer?” Natasha asked over the phone.

Tony was on his way back to the Compound and had Natasha on speakerphone. “Me as a politician? Technically one, anyway.”

“I think it would work, Tony. We’d have someone on the inside, fighting for us, an advantage we didn’t have before.” Natasha pointed out the obvious. “It would work best for us.”

“This is going to make me a big target of Ross.”

“We’ll deal with him if he tries anything,” vowed Natasha, her voice hard.

“If there is one thing I didn’t expect when I went for this meeting was to become a part of the Accords committee,” moaned Tony.
Natasha laughed. “Only if you accept.”

“Any replacement of Ross’ could be worse, even if they say they are neutral. They could still try to hinder us, something we cannot allow to happen, not with Thanos on his way.” Tony leaned back in his seat.

“No,” replied Natasha quietly. “This might be a good change. You’re not going to become Secretary of State if you take Ross’ spot on the Accords committee are you?”

Tony’s eyes widened. “God, I hope not!”

“You’re accepting then?”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice. It is the safest option. And it demonstrates how we do want to work with the governments of the world and respect their sovereignty. I’ll call the President when I get back and accept the proposal.”

- - - - -

The very next day it was announced to the world of Tony’s appointment to the Accords Committee. In protest about being removed from the Accords Committee, Ross had resigned as Secretary of State though he refused to answer questions from the press about why Tony had usurped his position. The President still had yet to decide on a new Secretary of State.

It didn’t take long for a new draft document of the Accords to be created, making the changes Tony and Natasha had requested.

Now, all that needed to be done, was to ratify the Accords.

And Tony’s job to keep the team together would be completed; one step closer to defeating Thanos for good.

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Monday 6th June 2016

Monday morning came and found Tony in his office at the Compound, reading through his emails forwarded to him regarding the developments of the Accords when Natasha arrived, a grim look on her face, holding an envelope in her hands.

“I found it among the post. Just one word written on the front. ‘Stark’. I do not recognise the handwriting. Appears to be an attempt to hide who it is from, though I can take a guess as to who is responsible.”

Tony frowned. “It’s from someone who has been in this building recently otherwise it wouldn’t have reached here.”

“All the scans have come back negative. It is safe to open.”

Tony slit his finger underneath the envelope. “I think it is from Ross. He’s not too happy about losing his position. He’s been made to look like a monster. I figured he might come after me, especially since I have ruined his career of making legislations against superheroes. He probably got the letter through security here by planting it on someone to put in the post.”

“I’m surprised he would be so open about it,” replied Natasha calmly, though there was a hint of
“He’s lost everything,” replied Tony. “He has nothing else to lose since his whole reputation has been tarnished. Taking Ross out of play means the Accords are more likely to be amended. We’ve got to consider every variable towards the endgame, Nat. We cannot leave any piece left unturned.”

“Agreed.” Natasha watched as Tony pulled out a piece of paper, opened it up and then promptly showed it to her.

Written in pen which was supposed to be a bad attempt at child’s writing were the words:

Mark my words, Stark. I’ll get you for this.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

So, Ross is threatening Tony? What will he do? *evil laugh*

The scene in Civil War where Steve sees Bucky for the first time, which I briefly mention early on in this chapter, I don't think they were given kill orders to kill Bucky. The way the scene is set up makes me think they were intending on bringing Bucky in but only kill as a last resort. The fact that they capture Bucky when they had him surrounded after the chase instead of killing him says a lot to me that Steve was misled about the orders concerning Bucky. They could have easily shot Bucky instead of taking the effort to bring him in. But those are my thoughts.

Next chapter: Zemo finally makes his move!

To be posted next Sunday.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Eight: Confronting Zemo

Chapter Summary

Tony and Nat get the alert Zemo is making his move...

Chapter Notes

Finally, we return to Zemo in this chapter! And the plot moves forward...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER EIGHT

Confronting Zemo

Wednesday 8th June 2016

The text came through quite late at night when Tony was already in bed with Pepper lying next to him. They hadn’t fallen asleep yet when his phone vibrated.

“Who’d be texting you at this time?” murmured Pepper sleepily. They’d resumed their relationship a few days before, sleeping for the first time since they had gone on a break, taking a few weeks to return to the point where they could move forward again.

Tony reached for his phone and sat upright as soon as he saw the text. “Shit. I’ve got to go.”

Pepper, now wide-awake, sat up, resting her hand on the palm of her hand as she leaned on her elbow. “What is it?”

“It’s Peter. He has told his Aunt about being Spider-Man. Apparently she’s freaking out. I need to get there!” He’d hoped the kid wouldn’t tell his Aunt on his own but apparently he had. At least she hadn’t walked in on Peter in his costume which had been the sole reason she’d discovered Peter’s true identity previously.

Tony remembered getting the call from May in the middle of a meeting. He’d had to dash away and soothe over a potential breakdown which had taken him hours to sort out. “I might be gone a while.”

“Do you want me to come?” asked Pepper.

Tony shook his head, already pulling on a pair of trousers and a shirt before grabbing his phone and the detachable Arc Reactor, placing it on the front his shirt. “I’ll take the suit. Be there quicker!”

“Be careful!” Pepper called out as he ran out of the room.

Tony made for the nearest emergency exit as his suit began to cover his body, ordering FRIDAY to
open it before he engaged his thrusters and shot out into the darkness, increasing his thrust capacity so he could get to Queens faster.

He was there in ten minutes, landing on the building’s rooftop and deactivating the suit before going through the emergency exit and to the sixth floor. Knocking on the Parker’s apartment door, it opened quickly and Peter urged him in. He looked fearful, frightened.

“I told her and she just…” Peter pointed to his Aunt who was sitting on the sofa, stock still.

Tony moved in front of her, sitting down on the chair off to the side. “Ms. Parker?”

“How could you?” she whispered.

Tony swallowed. This was familiar territory. It was the exact same words May had said to him when he’d arrived after she’d inadvertently walked into Peter’s room and seen him in his costume. However, his response could be given differently this time. He’d apologised before. “I’m not sure what you mean, Ms. Parker.”

“You knew… About Peter’s abilities. What he could do.”

“I did… And I was going to tell you. Peter asked me not to so I told him I would give him a chance to talk to you first. Its better it comes from him. He only came forward because I urged him to. Otherwise, you would still be in the dark now.” Tony glanced at Peter and mouthed: Why didn’t you call me?

“Is this what this internship is about? Not to help him find a career but so he can join your team?”

“The internship is real,” insisted Tony. “Access to Stark Industries labs and projects with the Research and Development department… There is a lot Peter can learn from us... but, I will not lie to you, the skills he has as Spider-Man would come in handy for the Avengers. And he would only be called in if it was absolutely necessary, as a last resort. I wouldn’t willingly put him in danger if I could help it.”

May’s piercing eyes studied Tony’s face. “I’m not sure I can trust you.”

“How long have you known?”

“A few weeks. I’d heard about the vigilante Spider-Man when his videos were flagged up on my system. They seemed way too real to be fake. I decided to try to locate him and it led me to this apartment. I haven’t been on this since the beginning if that is what you were thinking,” explained Tony, hoping May would accept his answer.

May tipped her head in her nephew’s direction. “Do you want the internship?”

“Why not?” He was quiet and refined, aware that Peter’s future in his life rested on how he handled May.

“How long have you known?”

The truth was the safest option. “No.” He couldn’t deceive her. She needed to know, no matter what they faced in the future, Peter wouldn’t be safe going into the line of work he was. “But his skills give him higher durability, capable of surviving things normal humans would not. He’d be
going into dangerous situations but is less likely to be harmed.” The image of Peter fading in his arms pushed into his mind. He didn’t need the reminder right now! “The world is a dangerous place, are any of us ever truly safe?” he reasoned.

“No,” May answered quietly. “Not even you.”

“Right.”

“I do not mind the internship itself… It’s the heroics I’m not sure on…”

Tony glanced at Peter before replying. “I don’t think you could really stop him if you wanted to. He was given those abilities for a reason. There is always a reason for something happening, whether it is good or bad. We want our children to reach their full potential. Peter can give so much more than he already can do with the right training and the right equipment to keep him safe.”

Because Peter was definitely getting a new suit. The home-made one was not fit for purpose… At all.

“Would you still carry on if I asked you not to?” May asked.

Peter lowered his gaze. “I can’t ignore people needing help. Not when I have these abilities where I could make a difference. I caught a bus, Aunt May, saved the people with just my strength alone.”

Tony watched the exchange carefully.

May fell silent, her shoulders shaking as she held back the tears.

“You have my word that Peter’s internship is real. He will not be called forward by the Avengers unless we really need him to be there,” added Tony, reiterating his previous point. It was important for Peter’s Aunt to understand this. Previously she had taken a while to accept Tony’s role in her nephew’s life but she had seen the good Peter could do under Tony’s tutelage.

“You’ll be sixteen soon. In a few months even…” May reasoned. “You’ll be able to drive… Nearly an adult… If your uncle was here, he’d encourage you, not hinder you from using your abilities. He’d be so proud of what you’ve become.”

It was awkward listening to her words, feeling like he was intruding upon a deeply personal conversation.

“But you’ve been saving people, helping others in need. We’ve always taught you to help others, to be the best you can be… And, I suppose, if doing this, helping the Avengers is the way to go forward, I cannot be the one to stop you…No matter how much I may worry about you.”

Peter gaped, surprise crossing his features. “You’re letting me continue being Spider-Man?”

“I am.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But there will be conditions,” added May. “Your schoolwork is important too. Having an internship at Stark Industries does not mean you can slack off. I expect good grades from you. You have to manage your time appropriately if this is going to work. Can you promise me that?”

Peter nodded. “I can. Definitely!”

“Good.” May shifted position so she could look at Tony. “How often would he be at the
“Every Friday night, if that is acceptable to you?” suggested Tony. “My driver, Happy, will pick him up from school and drive him to the Avengers Facility upstate. He’ll stay the night and we’ll bring him back Saturday morning. How does that sound?”

“He won’t be at the New York building?” asked May.

Tony shook his head. “No. I’m selling the tower. All Stark Industries business is transferring upstate in a few months. Peter will be able to have full access to my lab and state of the art technology which is not yet in place within Stark Industries. If you would rather he didn’t…”

“No, no that’s fine,” said May.

Tony smiled. “Good.”

“So, this Friday?” she wanted to clarify.

“Unfortunately not. There are a few things I need to get sorted first before Peter begins his internship.” Mainly Zemo and the Accords. “Is the first Friday in August acceptable for you?” He directed the question at both Peter and May.

“It is,” responded Peter.

“I’ll put it in the diary.” May leaned forward. “I just want you to promise me one thing, Mr. Stark.”

He knew what was coming.

“If something bad happens and it’s a disaster all around, promise me you will do whatever it takes to bring him home.”

No hesitation was required. “I promise. If it cannot be me it will be someone from the small circle of people that I trust: Pepper, Happy and Rhodey.”

“That is all I can ask for, Mr. Stark.”

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Sunday 19th June 2016

“I’m worried,” Natasha spoke quietly, approaching Tony from behind.

Putting the StarkPad down on the table in front of him, Tony glanced up at his friend. “How so? We’re doing everything right so far.”

“We believe we are.” Natasha slid onto the seat beside him. “It’s Ross. FRIDAY cannot locate him anywhere.”

“He’s gone off-grid?”

She nodded, silently watching for his reaction.

“This wasn’t in the plans.”

“Nor were you joining the Accords committee,” she pointed out.
Tony rubbed the back of his head. “I’m honestly surprised the appointment has been well-received. I’ve caused a lot of trouble over the years. For them to value my opinion…?” He shook his head. “Feels weird.”

“You’ve matured.” The statement was not wrong. Arms crossed over her chest, she scrutinised Tony. “So, what do we do about Ross?”

Shifting on the chair, Tony leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “There isn’t much we can do. Ross has the connections to disappear if he really wants to. He sent me the threat, remember? That he’ll get me?”

“That’s what worries me. If we lose him…”

“It might work to our advantage. He needs to be detained. He’s going to attack me at some point. We may as well take him down at the same time. Not kill though.” Tony smiled, holding up his wrist. “I have trackers in my wrist. They’re a leftover from when I called the suits to me. I never had them removed. But FRIDAY can track them.”

“Will he be that obvious?” Natasha seemed dubious.

“He’s lost everything. What else has he got left to lose?” asked Tony. “Ross has been after the Hulk for years. If he had the chance to take down Bruce, he would. He’s issued a direct threat to me. The question is when he will act.”

Natasha was about to respond when FRIDAY’s voice echoed from the ceiling. “Boss, Zemo is on the move.”

Their heads snapped up, eyes wide open in surprise.

“Makes sense,” mumbled Tony. “It is only a few days before the Accords are due to be signed… He’s still aiming at framing Barnes. Not knowing his plan has already failed to tear us apart further.”

Natasha had known Steve had told Tony the truth. “Good.” She shifted her gaze to his Arc Reactor, placed on his chest. “You do not always carry that around.”

“I knew we’d be getting an alert soon,” he replied. “Figured it would be useful to have it on.” Reaching into his pocket, Tony pulled out a smaller Arc Reactor. “Here is yours. Place it on your chest and it should attach to any clothing you wear. Press it to activate the suit. I have a full suit, yours is just for flight capacity. You do have a few repulsor shots available to you if you need it.”

Natasha took the Reactor. “Does it matter where I put it on my chest?”

“No.” Tony tapped his fingers over his Reactor and the nanonites spread over his body, engulfing him in his suit. The helmet formed yet the face-place didn’t close up. He watched as Natasha placed her smaller Reactor in the middle of her body, just slightly below the clavicles.

She pressed her fingers to it and nanonites spread out, forming a thin, black armoured suit around her body. “Feels weird the nanonites running over me.”

“It takes a while getting used to.” Tony glanced up at the ceiling. “FRIDAY are all the exits clear? I don’t want anyone to see us.”

“Yes, boss. The exit down the corridor from this office is clear.”
The nanonites sealed around Natasha’s body.

“I know you haven’t had any practice in the suit yet. I only finished it recently. FRIDAY can control the suit so we can be on our way.”

“Can’t be that hard.”

“You’d be surprised,” retorted Tony. He walked to the door to the common area he’d been sitting in, opened it and saw the fire exit door already open. He fired up his repulsors, his feet hovering in mid-air. “FRIDAY?”

Natasha’s thrusters fired up. Their helmets sealed over their faces and Tony leaned forward and shot ahead, flying out of the fire exit and up and high into the sky. Natasha followed suit, FRIDAY controlling her suit.

“FRIDAY, course plotted for Cleveland?”

“Yes, boss.”

“Good. Have you given Nat instructions on how to use the suit?”

“She has. I think I’ll be fine to control it…” responded Nat. “I know if I lose control she’ll be there to help. If this is going to become a regular thing, flying off with you Stark, then I need to learn as we go along.” Leaning forward she flew past Tony, stretching her hands out behind her to increase her boost.

Tony moved in front of her. “Eh… Cleveland is that way.” He pointed off to the right.

“Show off,” grumbled Natasha.

Tony laughed.

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Cleveland

“Sensors indicate one heat signature in the house. Looks like Zemo mounted a curb and hit the occupant’s car,” observed Natasha from her outpost just above the house they knew Zemo was still in. “How are we going to do this?”

“I say we just go in. I go in the back and you the front. He won’t be able to easily escape if so.”

“Unless he smashes a window.”

“There is that,” admitted Tony, “but we are armoured up. He isn’t. And if he leaves the house and it becomes another chase… I’d rather keep this as quiet as possible. The Accords signing is just a few days away. I’d rather not jeopardise our position on it by making a mess in our own country in trying to apprehend a criminal.”

“Good points,” mused Natasha. “But we cannot arrest him if he has committed no crime.”

“I’m certain he’s murdered the occupant of the house. FRIDAY initially reported two heat signatures.” Slowing beginning to maneuver down, Tony headed for the back garden. “Let’s go.”

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Natasha landed awkwardly on her feet in front of the main entrance. Tony had installed minimal sensors in her helmet so it was easier for her to work with the suit. She didn’t need the full interface he had in his own suit.

There was still one heat signature detected in the house.

Stepping silently forward, she reached the front door.

“I’m in position,” said Tony.

“At three. One. Two…. THREE!” Her shoulder hit the front door and she crashed through it, swinging her arm around and raising her palm at the startled man in the room before he dropped almost everything and made a run for it, only to hear a crashing sound in the distance as Tony made his own entrance.

The man – Zemo – stumbled back into Natasha’s line of fire. Palm raised she pointed her repulsor at him. “Stop running and we won’t hurt you.”

He snarled. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“Too bad, we are,” said Tony appearing behind the man. “Looks like you’ve been busy.”

Natasha noticed the man off to the side, tied by his ankles, his head in water, not moving. He was clearly dead. “You gonna tell us why you killed him?”

“He was Hydra,” explained Zemo, his voice filled with bitter.

“Didn’t give you what you wanted?” guessed Natasha. “That’s why you wanted the Red Book in your hand?” It hadn’t escaped her notice what Zemo had been holding. “Think you can control the Winter Soldier do you?”

Zemo’s eyes turned to slits. “How did you know?”

“You’re not the only one to unencrypt the data.” Natasha stepped forward. “We’ve been doing it too. We know all about the Red Book and December 16th, 1991.”

Zemo’s face paled. “How?”

“Are you asking how we knew what you were looking for or how we know about those two specific things?”

“Both,” he hissed in return.

Tony’s faceplate lifted. “Steve Rogers told me everything. You wanted to split us apart but you’ve underestimated how strong a team we really are. You’ve lost before you’ve even begun to tear us apart.”

Zemo’s eyes were widening but also calculating as he considered the information Tony had just dropped on him.

“You attempted to gamble,” added Natasha, “hoping you’d win. But you’ve just earned yourself a prison sentence.”

“NO!” Zemo hand’s moved quickly and he pulled a gun from the waistband of his trousers and –

“NO!” Tony leaped forward, reaching for the gun as Zemo pulled the trigger. The bullet bounced
off his faceplate and he twisted Zemo’s arm, forcing the gun arm down. “Drop the gun!”

He refused.

Natasha kicked Zemo’s hand with her suited foot, forcing his fingers to open and drop the gun and she kicked it aside. Wincing in pain, Zemo dropped to his knees, clutching his injured and now bruised hand.

Natasha deactivated her suit and from her waist-belt, she pulled out a set of cuffs. With Tony standing with his palm pointed at Zemo, she rounded the man and pulled his arms behind his back, cuffing them together. “You just confessed to wanting to use the Winter Soldier and,” she plucked the Red Book from the floor which Zemo had dropped when Tony had prevented him from shooting himself, “and you killed a man. It doesn’t matter he was Hydra, you intentionally murdered him. There is more than enough reason in this room alone to have you convicted and sent down for years.”

Zemo grunted but refused to speak.

“I’ll make the call to the relevant authorities. We’ll need to take Zemo into custody.” Tony began to walk away, the rest of his suit retracting back into the arc reactor as he moved into the kitchen.

Natasha stood guard, arms folded across her chest, watching the man carefully.

At least apprehending Zemo meant the Accords would go off without a hitch.

- - - - -

Tony made a report to the Accords committee regarding their capture of Zemo as soon as they returned to the Compound. Though he was a representative he was still required by law to write up a written report. Zemo was taken into custody by the police and taken to a local police station.

Since Zemo wasn’t enhanced the Accords committee had no jurisdiction over him.

He was out of their hands for now and would be tried on the crimes he had committed in Cleveland.

The one thing Tony did keep was the Red Book for the Winter Soldier. He felt it better to keep so they at least knew where it was. He considered destroying it but reason overcame his desire to destroy it. What if someone else knew the code words and could control Barnes? They’d be able to use the Red Book against Barnes to gain control back.

Tony placed it in his office, hidden away in a secured draw underneath his desk, making sure only Natasha knew its location.

He was sure it was safe.

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Monday 20th June 2016

It was two days to go before the Accords were due to be signed in Vienna. Tony was sitting at his desk writing out a speech he intended to make. He probably wouldn’t follow it but he did need to make some notes on what he had to cover.

His eyes were struggling to stay open which was unusual for him. He couldn’t understand it. The coffee should be keeping him awake. He reached across his desk for his cup and took a sip from
his coffee, drinking the rest of it whole.

He wrote a few more lines, read it back and frowned. It didn’t make any sense! His vision blurred. The struggle to keep his eyes open was becoming almost impossible.

“FRIDAY?” His voice slurred. “Wha…”

And then he slumped forward on his desk, his whole body going limp as his body succumbed to the darkness that had been threatening to consume him ever since he had started to drink his coffee.

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Natasha’s eyes opened slowly to find Steve shaking her. “Ste… Steve?” Pushing herself up, Natasha looked around and found herself on the floor. “Steve? Why am I… on the floor?”

“You were drugged,” stated Steve. He held up her coffee mug. “The whole pot is contaminated with a sleeping agent. We both were. My enhanced metabolism fought it off quicker.”

She struggled to clear her head. “Why coffee? And why wasn’t it detected?”

“New batch delivered this morning. Tony opened…” Steve trailed off, eyes widening.

Natasha caught on quick. “Tony!”

Stumbling to her feet, still feeling dizzy, they both ran for Tony’s office, Steve helping her along. She had a horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Down the corridor and up the stairs, nearly tripping over her feet, Natasha forced herself to move, trying to shake off the effects of the sleeping agent hidden within the coffee granules. Steve reached the office first, the door slightly ajar.

She was almost afraid to enter it.

He nudged the door open.

“Tony!” Natasha stumbled forward.

He was slumped on the floor, just unconscious, and his office was a mess.

Draws were tugged out, and papers were strewn all over the floor.

Natasha knelt down next to him. “Tony…” She shook him gently.

He started to groan as he was tugged back to the waking world.

His fingers grasped her own. “Wha…?”

“Hey… don’t fight it… Sleeping agent…” she advised.

“I… was… was… at… my… desk…” he managed. “I fell… asleep… at… my… desk.” He winced in pain, starting to blink rapidly to clear his own vision.

Natasha swallowed, gently sitting him up. “Someone put a sleeping agent in the coffee granules.”

Tony rubbed his head as he sat up, awareness coming back to him. “But… why… wasn’t… it
“It wouldn’t be if it came from the usual supplier,” reasoned Steve. “Tony, is there anything in this office someone would want to take?”

Tony’s eyes widened. He grasped Natasha’s wrists. “Nat… check the secured draw underneath the desk.”

Realisation hit at his words. Tony did have something someone would want but how had they known to find it there?

She crawled over and peered underneath the desk, using her fingers to probe for the secured draw. It was slightly jarred out of place. Already knowing what she would find, Natasha pulled the draw out and showed the contents to Tony and Steve.

“Shit,” murmured Tony, still slightly drugged.

“What is it?” asked Steve, his eyes flicking worriedly between the two. “What was in there?”

Steve wouldn’t know what was there. They’d decided not to tell him when they had apprehended Zemo.

Tony groaned, his mind trying to catch up with the events that were moving far too quickly. “Nat… the Red Book… it’s gone.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Uh, oh... who has the red book? Will the Accords signing go off without a hitch? Plus, Nat has her own Iron Man suit now...

Coffee granules... always check the coffee granules...

Next chapter: The Accords signing in Vienna...

To be posted next Sunday.

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Nine: The Winter Soldier

Chapter Summary

The Accords signing doesn't go well for our heroes...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments! All your questions about how someone got into the Compound, how the Red Book was stolen will be answered over the following few chapters... Please bear with me as the answers come out!

Please, enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER NINE

The Winter Soldier

Monday 20th June 2016


Tony cursed. He hadn’t wanted Rogers to have known just yet, not until they’d succeeded in bringing Barnes into the Avengers. His long-term plan was to unite the two friends again but not until after the Accords situation had been sorted. The Red Book being taken complicated matters and could just throw the Accords off.

Shaking his head again as the drowsiness wore off from the sleeping agent, Tony gingerly got to his feet, steadying himself by his desk. Whoever had stolen the Red Book had, had no qualms in throwing Tony from his chair to the floor so they could access the secret compartment. No one apart from Natasha had known where it was or what it was for.

Unless... His mind was ticking over, working furiously, to figure out who was behind this. He could make a guess but he doubted Ross would have done the job himself. “FRIDAY?”

There was no answer.

“She was disabled,” answered Steve. “When I woke up she was the first thing I tried. Whoever did this disabled her without any of us knowing.”

Tony groaned. “I’ll have to reboot her.” She might still be able to give them some answers but it depended on whether she had been hacked into by someone on-site or an outsider. His vision blurred slightly again. “Yesterday Nat and I apprehended a man in Cleveland. He killed a former Hydra agent and had a Red Book with him which he recovered at the scene. The Red Book contains instructions on how to activate the Winter Soldier.”
Steve’s eyebrows rose.

“Only Nat knew I had it in here. We were keeping it safe so no one could use it against Barnes. I thought it was safe here.” Tony dropped his chin down to his chest.

“Are you saying someone could control Bucky?” asked Steve, his voice tight. “I’ve been searching for him for two years. I’ve had no luck.”

Tony winced. “It’s possible. If they know where he is.”

“Tony… Do you know where he is?” Steve leaned forward, hands pressed down on Tony’s desk.

Exchanging a glance with Natasha who nodded slightly, Tony sighed. “Bucharest. Romania. He’s been there a few months, living a quiet life.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Steve’s fists clenched. “I thought we were supposed to trust one another!”

“Steve,” Natasha raised her hands, “we both decided not to tell you.”

“Why? You know I’ve been searching for him! I can’t believe you would keep this from me!”

“You can talk, keeping my parent’s deaths from me for years,” interjected Tony. “We only found the Red Book yesterday. At what point did we have a chance to tell you about it? We knew it existed, yes, but had no idea where it was until we got our hands on it.”

“We’ve been searching for it for months. We figured telling you about the Red Book would be a mistake, lead the wrong people to his location until we had it ourselves,” explained Natasha easily. “We were going to bring you in once the Accords were signed so we could bring Barnes back into the fold if he wanted to. Without the Accords to protect us we could have potentially led anyone to Barnes, any potential Hydra operative who could then use him. Better to leave him where he is whilst we worked to ensure the Red Book was found.”

“We were thinking of his safety and ours,” added Tony. “If someone else had found this Red Book and used it to control Barnes? Chaos.”

“But that is exactly what is going to happen,” said Steve. “What if they know where he is? What if they track him down?”

“FRIDAY is monitoring him,” reassured Natasha. “He’s been under surveillance with us for a while now.” Which was true but not as long as they were leading Steve to believe.

“FRIDAY is currently down.”

“Here, only,” noted Tony. “Her servers are only down here. She should be fine in the other places she is installed. The only way they can take her down across her entire network is to attack her central computer system which only I have access to on the mainframe. She should have full footage of Barnes’ hideout from the moment we began monitoring until whenever we stop. I’ll make a check as soon as I’ve rebooted her here.” He was already getting his phone out, logging onto his network.

Steve clenched his fists. “I can’t be dealing with this right now.”

“Steve…?” Natasha asked.
“Oh no…” Tony realised. He remembered what had happened at this point originally. Steve had hurriedly left to fly to London. “Peggy.”

“How do you know?”

“I knew her, Steve,” Tony had been too busy with the Accords last time to attend Peggy’s funeral even though he had wanted to. The time hadn’t been there for him. Same as it was now. “She was a constant figure in my life growing up. I knew her better then you did.”

“Her funeral is on the 22nd June, the same day as the Accords signing,” said Steve. “I have to be there for her.”

“We need you at the signing, Cap,” answered Tony. “I want to go to Peggy’s funeral too but it is our duty to show unity on the Accords.”

Steve shook his head. “No. I can’t. I’ll sign it when I get back.”

“Steve…” Natasha stepped forward. “There are bigger things in play here. Ross has threatened Tony.”

Tony’s sharp gaze towards her proved he hadn’t been expecting her to reveal that little nugget of information.

“Ross? The guy Tony replaced on the Accords Committee?” Steve moved back, surprise running across his features.

“Yes.” Natasha folded her arms across her chest.

“You think he did this?” Steve gestured around the room at the mess in Tony’s office.


Tony leaned back on his desk. “Ross has the contacts in place where he could learn the location of the Winter Soldier. If he gets his hands on the Red Book…” He had a feeling he knew what was going to happen.

“You believe he will use Bucky?” whispered Steve.

“On me, yes. He’s threatened me. The Red Book is now missing. It fits.” Tony hoped he was wrong. “He’ll want to get revenge and he’ll try to make it public, to try to split us apart by using Barnes.” His fingers ran over his phone screen. “FRIDAY?”

“Is everything alright, boss?” her voice echoed through the room. “Something… a virus…”

“I know.” Tony growled. “We’re fine. Can you check on Barnes? His location?” He hoped they still had time. If Ross got his hands on the Winter Soldier…. It didn’t bear thinking about. “If I’m right about this, Ross will not get his own hands dirty publicly. He’ll do it privately, behind the scenes.”

“Tony… are you sure?” Natasha had caught on. She was remembering the previous events too.

“I am.”

“What is it?” Steve wasn’t partial to what they knew about the future.

Their own knowledge was enabling them to jump to new conclusions of what could happen.
“Ross doesn’t like the Accords as they are. He’s also facing an investigation for keeping information from the President. He’s looking at a prison sentence for treason though he has been given bail.” Tony had been keeping that little nugget of information to himself. “He’s got nothing left to lose. He’ll try to disrupt the Accords signing with the Winter Soldier and attempt to get me in the process.”

Steve’s fists banged on the table hard. “Damn it!”

Surprised by the outburst, Tony stepped away from Steve. “We need you here, Cap.”

“I should be there for Peggy! I can’t miss her funeral! But this…”

“Barnes needs you,” said Natasha quietly. “Peggy is gone but you still have Barnes and if Tony is right and Ross does send the Winter Soldier after him then we need you there with us. You’re the only one Barnes will listen to.”

Steve sagged onto Tony’s chair.

“Steve, the choice is yours,” said Tony. “I’m not going to force you to do anything you do not want to do. But if Barnes shows up…”

“You need another super-soldier…” muttered Steve. “I’ll stay.”

“FRIDAY? Have you got a report on Barnes's location?” asked Tony.

“Negative, boss,” the A.I confirmed. “Barnes is gone. I’ve scanned the apartment, it’s a mess. All the CCTV from the area has been deleted. I cannot trace him.”

Steve slammed his fist down on the table again. He was angry this was happening at the inappropriate time.

“Damn.” Tony had been afraid of this. “I think… we can only assume Ross has Barnes and the Red Book.”

Natasha paced the office. “He must know we would realise he’d be behind this. He hasn’t exactly been subtle.”

“He’s got nothing left to lose, Nat. We can play him at his own game.”

“You’ve got a plan?” asked Steve.

“Sure have,” smirked Tony. “The Accords signing is the perfect place to attack since no weapons are allowed. Ross has made this personal. I do not believe he will get the Winter Soldier to assassinate me. He’ll make him capture me. Ross has nothing left to lose save his own life. He’s at the point where he doesn’t care. He knows we will make the connection between him and the Winter Soldier. My best guess is he’ll have Barnes bring me to him where he will then kill me himself. And then have the Winter Soldier kill him, effectively blaming the Winter Soldier for our deaths.”

“What if you’re wrong and you’re shot dead?” Steve grimaced.

“I won’t be.” If there was one thing he was certain of, it was the idea he wouldn’t be shot dead. Tony attributed it to the mysterious voices giving him that particular feeling without actually confirming it inside his head. “If I’m right and I am taken, you can track me. I have a tracker in my arm. FRIDAY can access it and tell you my exact location. Unless Ross pre-empts that you should
be able to follow easily. I suspect he’d be waiting nearby.”

“You’d allow yourself to be taken?” Natasha asked.

“If it was evident that was what the Winter Soldier was aiming for, yes. Best way to catch Ross. He’ll hate me even more though if we stop him but he’s only got himself to blame. I think it’s the best option we have,” said Tony. “This way we end the threat Ross poses for good.”

Wednesday 22\textsuperscript{nd} June

The day of the Accords signing dawned bright and early. They’d travelled overnight to Vienna. Tony had purposefully left his Arc Reactor behind. The whole point of the Accords was to show co-operation with the other economies of the world. Walking into the signing with his Arc Reactor would be stating he didn’t really support them. He could have hidden it underneath his clothes but for his plan to work to expose Ross he needed to be defenceless.

Though Tony was never really defenceless.

Not these days anyway. The watch of his wrist was a testament to that.

Both Steve and Nat were combat fighters, able to fight without weaponry though Nat had hidden a few small Widow Bites in her sleeves which were undetectable to the scanners as they walked into the building holding the Accords. Steve had been forced to leave his shield behind, something he hadn’t been happy about but had ultimately accepted anyway.

Tony was dressed in a suit with a lanyard around his neck holding his badge stating both his position on the Accords Committee and his role as Iron Man.

Not all the Avengers were joining them. Clint had elected to stay at home with his family though had signed in advance, as had Wanda, Vision, and Sam. Rhodey had decided to attend the ceremony in Vienna and Tony had informed him of Ross’ threat to him and his feeling he would be attacked here. Rhodey hadn’t been too happy about his best friend putting himself in danger but Tony had insisted.

Tony walked around the conference hall, talking to various representatives, keeping an eye out for any danger. He even had FRIDAY monitoring the place. He’d given her instructions to notify him through his watch if she visualised Barnes on her sensors. He was sure something was going to happen.

“Mr. Stark!”

Tony turned to find a young man walking towards him. “T’Challa.” Tony held out his hand to the prince of Wakanda. “And King T’Chaka, welcome.”

“It is good to see you here, Mr. Stark,” the King replied. “Your quick thinking in Lagos saved lives. A wider atrocity could have been committed and Wakanda would have suffered the effects of the bomb had it gone off in the market place.”

He shook the King’s hand. “Thank you. I try my best to save as many lives as possible. Regrettably, it doesn’t always happen.”

“It is good to see you representing your country on the Committee. It was a brave choice, especially if you are out in combat,” T’Chaka observed. “I can think of no one better placed to be
impartial on the Accords. I hope our two great countries can work together in the future.”

*Interesting choice of words…* Tony mused. As of now, Wakanda was known to be one of the poorest countries in the world with a lack of available technology to advance. But he knew Wakanda hid true wealth and advancement. He hoped to bring them out of the shadows and out into the world. They needed Wakanda against Thanos. “It would be wonderful to see your great country. I feel your country would benefit greatly if the borders were opened though I understand the hesitation to do so. You prosper well enough on your own to not need the rest of the world’s aid.” He saw both the King and Prince’s eyes shift slightly as if they had noticed Tony’s words were hinting at a deeper knowledge of their country.

T’Chaka straightened. “Perhaps we shall sit down in the future and discuss collaborating with you, Mr. Stark. I’m sure we could come to an agreement.”

“My pleasure,” smiled Tony as the two walked away. Seeing T’Challa again reminded him he needed to bring the Black Panther into the fold. *One step closer…*

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The Accords signing went smoothly, ratifying the Accords into international law with all the countries that had signed up to it implementing it into their own laws. Tony mingled with the delegates, trusting in FRIDAY to alert him to any trouble, though he did remain aware of his surroundings.

Natasha moved past his shoulder. “Everything running smoothly so far.”

“I know,” he replied. Maybe he had got it wrong? Maybe Ross didn’t intend to attack him here. Still, at least T’Challa still had his father. He wouldn’t lose him just yet. “I just have this feeling…”

“Me too,” she murmured.

It was reassuring Natasha had the same feeling he had. He wasn’t going insane then. She moved off into the crowd, smiling and laughing at other delegate’s jokes, engaging in conversation with them.

A man approached him, just like many had throughout the day. The man was wearing glasses and was nearly bald with tufts of ginger at the side of his head. The faint sensation of recognition tingled in his brain and he couldn’t help but think he should know who this man was.

“Mr. Stark, it is an honour to meet you!” He held out his hand for Tony to shake.

But Tony felt suspicious and stepped back, making sure to have one hand on his watch in case he needed to activate it at a moment’s notice.

The bald man came to a stop in front of him.

And then it hit Tony. He knew who this man was. He recognised him. He knew how much this man had hated being compared to him by Stane. This man was…

Before he could complete the thought he was shot in the back of the shoulder and a flash echoed across his eyes and everything went instantly black.
The explosion sent Natasha flying. She rolled, coughing and spluttering as smoke filled the air. She held her hand to her mouth trying to prevent the intake of the thick smoke. She couldn’t see a thing as dizziness overcame her. Lying on her belly, she crawled along the floor, trying to stay beneath the smoke.

She could hear voices off to the side and the movement of shapes within the thick smoke.

“Steve?” she called out.

“I’m here.” Steve scrambled up next to her, a hand over his mouth and nose. “Tony was right.”

“We need to find him.”

“He got shot, Nat.”

Natasha cricked her neck trying to look at Steve through the smoke. “What?”

“He went down.” Steve coughed. “Bucky is here. I’m sure of it.”

They began to crawl through the smoke, coming across bodies on the floor, none injured just knocked out. Tony had been on the other side of the room, close to the exit when the explosion had happened. The attackers could have easily taken him out in the mere seconds it had taken them to regroup.

“Where’s Rhodey?” Natasha realised they were missing one person.

“Out-cold. As the explosion went off I saw someone hit him in the head. Everything happened too fast for me to shout out a warning. We can’t do anything for him now.” Steve pushed himself to his feet. “This is going too slow. We’ll have to run.” He was coughing more as he breathed in the noxious fumes of the smoke. Holding out his hand to Natasha, he yanked her to her feet. “Come on!”

Natasha stumbled as Steve pounded his way towards the exit, the smoke descending all around them. She could hear coughing and stumbling and screaming all around her as the various delegates of the Accords struggled to comprehend what had happened.

“Tony!” Steve shouted out.

Struggling to see, Natasha pushed herself forward, tumbling out of the front doors of the building and out into the large open space between the road and the building where she could see a limp figure being pushed into a waiting black van.

Bullets splattered around their legs and Steve pulled her behind cover. Looking up she could see the Winter Soldier pouring continuous bullets in their path, preventing them from racing out of cover to stop Tony from being taken. Her head still felt dizzy and she felt sick to her stomach as the fumes from the smoke wreaked havoc on her body. Natasha watched as Steve tried to make a run for the van but was stopped as the Winter Soldier landed in front of him, mask in place over his face, his eyes dull as his gun turned to focus upon Steve’s chest.

Steve threw himself to the side and the bullet missed him, giving the Winter Soldier enough time to turn and run back to the waiting black van, leaping in behind where Tony had been thrown with the doors slamming behind him. The van accelerated and roared off the premise and into the road as the five men who had collected Tony’s limp body raced towards Steve and Natasha, their fists
raised to fight.

Behind them, smoke continued to pour out of the building and in the distance sirens could be heard.

Steve stood straight and tall, Natasha weak on her feet from the smoke inhalation.

“Stop right where you are!” demanded Steve, his voice ringing high and clear. “You can’t win!”

“Doesn’t matter,” one man replied as he stalked forward. “It doesn’t matter if we are caught. We’ve been rewarded handsomely for our assistance in acquiring Tony Stark. He’ll be dead before you find him.”

Natasha limped forward. “There are more ways to track a man than you imagine.”

“It’s already been prepared,” another replied.

“What’s been prepared?” Steve asked.

But none of the five men answered, instead breaking into a run and headed straight for them.

Natasha ducked, swinging her legs out tripping one man up, before punching another underneath the jaw. A third tugged her hair and she found herself pulled back, only to whirl and knock him in the chin with her elbow, almost choking him.

She reached for her wrists, yanking up the sleeve to reveal a thinner bracelet, equipped with a few of her Widow’s bites. Tony had given it to her that morning, a weapon which had bypassed the sensors to get into the Accords. Twisting her wrist she threw two of them at one of her attackers, electrifying him in the process. He fell and did not rise. Next, she twisted, kicking out with her left foot, connecting the sole with one of her attacker’s head, pushing him away, giving her enough time to get to her feet and fire off another Widow’s bite to hit him.

Now she was down to one or was as Steve barrelled into the man, punching him in the head as he did so. The man collapsed to the ground, boneless and out cold.

Natasha breathed out easily.

“They got away.”

“Don’t worry.” Nat pulled out her phone. “We can track Tony with his implants. He gave me access. I can get his location – ” Her face fell. “Shit.”

Steve frowned. “Not transmitting?” he asked.

Natasha shook her head. “No. They’re offline. We can’t trace him.” Reaching to her earpiece which connected her to FRIDAY, Natasha spoke quietly. “FRIDAY, can you trace the black van that just left?”

It was a few moments before she got a response. “No. The van entered a tunnel not far from here. It hasn’t left.”

Natasha cursed under her breath. “They swapped vehicles out of sight of any cameras. We can’t trace him.”

“And they have Bucky too,” said Steve.

“I know.” Natasha turned back to the building behind them as emergency vehicles pulled up.
“Steve, we have to come at this from a different angle. Maybe we can still track Tony before Ross fulfills his plan?”

“Are we still assuming its Ross?”

Natasha’s eyes zeroed in on a man stumbling from the building as the emergency services barrelled past. “Him. I saw him with Tony just before the flash went off. I turned away just as he got shot. I didn’t see it, but are you sure he was shot?”

“Positive.”

Natasha winced. She hoped there hadn’t been any casualties. “Then let us get ourselves a man to interrogate.”

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The darkness started to recede and dull pain in his shoulder began to throb as consciousness slowly started to bring him out of the slumber he was in.

Tony shifted uncomfortably, his eyes opening slowly. His shoulder burned. His vision focused. He was flat out on the floor of a large van, arms unbound and ankles free. That was a big mistake. Moving his head he saw his captor.

The Winter Soldier stood on guard, holding a gun pointed right at Tony.

“I don’t suppose I can offer you freedom in return for letting me go?” asked Tony.

The Soldier did not reply.

Agony burst through his shoulder and he gingerly felt behind his back, feeling for the entry wound. It had been patched up. He’d been out longer than he thought. He got to his feet, the gun following his every movement.

“I guess you have orders to wound not kill?” Tony tried again. He could hear the sound of an engine. The van he was in was taking him somewhere.

Still no response.

He still had his watch. But he was injured.

He knew he’d lose.

It was worth a shot.

He tapped the front of his watch, pulling on the gauntlet before the Soldier could react, twisting his palm and firing at the Winter Soldier. The Soldier moved, twisted and lashed out, aiming for Tony’s head with the butt of his gun.

Tony ducked, thrusting out his arm with the gauntlet, firing off a shot but the Soldier had been ready for the attack. He was already leaping to the side, using the sides of the van to catapult himself off of it, leaping towards Tony, who tried to shift his aim only for the Soldier to tackle him before he had a chance to retaliate.

Tony fell back, his head and shoulder banging against the floor. Fiery pain erupted and he yelled out.
The Winter Soldier was on him in an instant, straddling his chest and one hand curled around Tony’s throat, tightening his grasp as he restricted airflow.

Choking, Tony brought up his Gauntlet-covered hand and tried to fire again yet the Soldier noticed and slammed his foot onto the arm, trapping Tony’s arm against the floor.

His other arm was still free. A single punch to the Winter Soldier’s jaw did nothing.

The grip on his throat tightened.

Blackness was starting to fall around the sides of his vision.

“Don’t!” Tony choked out, now abandoning all attempts to fight.

But the Winter Soldier had his orders.

Being choked into unconsciousness wasn’t a pleasant experience. Desperate to get air into his lungs, despite the pain in his shoulder and his throbbing head, Tony forced his hands onto the wrist of the Winter Soldier, trying to pry the cold fingers away from his throat. Slowly but surely he could feel the fingers slipping from his throat. Determination spread through him. He could do this!

The Winter Soldier’s eyes widened only briefly before he raised his metal arm above his head, forming it into a fist.

Eyes widening, Tony tried to move but couldn’t as the Winter Soldier brought his fist down hard on Tony’s cheek, cutting his lip and bruising his cheek.

Dazed, Tony’s attempts to stop being strangled loosened and the fingers only tightened around his throat again. “No…!”

He tried again, rather feebly, but it was enough to anger the Winter Soldier further who curled his metal hand into a wrist again and punched Tony not once but twice in the side of the head.

The first hit was enough to make him lose consciousness for a few seconds, the second punch made him fall into blackness, his whole body going limp as he lost sight of everything.

“William Ginter Riva.” Natasha, arms crossed over her chest, observed the man in front of him. “Former engineer at Stark Industries, fired by Obadiah Stane just a few hours prior to his death, and now a criminal in the eyes of the law. Tell us what you know and maybe the law will go easy on you.”

The man did not reply, just stared stonily ahead.

“Who hired you?” Natasha tried again, her eyes sharp as she observed the man in the police interrogation room.

Still, there was no response.

“You’re only making things worse for yourself by not answering. I saw you by Stark before the smoke bomb went off. You’re not going to get out of this.”

“I was merely asked to keep Stark distracted. I did not know what was going to happen,” the man admitted.
“I find that hard to believe. Most of the people involved in this attack are former disgruntled Stark Industries employees who have been fired for various reasons. Obadiah Stane fired you, not Tony Stark, yet you seem to dislike him. Why?”

“Because of who he is, because of what he can do even with limited materials. I was unable to replicate the Arc Reactor. Stark is at fault for simply being better than me. I was fired from a job I loved because I could not complete the work assignment Stane had given me. I was one of the top scientists. Once Stane was gone I appealed to return, to have my position reinstated. Stark refused.”

“But that isn’t Tony’s fault you got fired. But you were complicit in aiding Stane and it is understandable he wouldn’t want to rehire someone who was helping him. Didn’t you find it odd when he tasked you with replicating the Arc Reactor technology?” Natasha asked, trying to sense how this man could hold a vendetta against Tony.

William sighed. “It doesn’t matter. Stark’s own actions caused me to lose my job. There are many of his ex-employees who hold grudges against him. This was our chance to make him suffer for once.”

Natasha chose to ignore his words. He’d be questioned further. “Tell me who hired you.”

“I don’t know. I was contacted anonymously to distract him at the Accords signing. I didn’t know what was going to happen. The other people involved in this? I don’t know them.”

“They’re all ex-Stark Industries employees. That is the connection. Fine, if you don’t know who is behind this, then do you know where Tony is?”

“No. As I said, I knew what I had to know.”

Natasha sighed. This wasn’t getting her anywhere. “Fine. You’ll be held here until charges are filed against you. I’m not the first person who will be interrogating you today.” Natasha rose from her chair and walked out, leaning against the wall. They’d lost Tony and had no way to track him.

They had to find him.

And fast.

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When the blackness receded Tony found himself in a cold and small room, lying on the floor with his shoulder on fire. It hurt like hell. His wrists were bound behind him.

“Ah, it is good to see you are finally awake, Stark.”

The man’s voice didn’t surprise Tony.

“Get him up. I want him facing me.”

A cold metal hand grabbed him by his hair and hoisted him up into a kneeling position. The movement jarred his shoulder and he hissed in pain. He focused his gaze on the man in front of him, clearly showing his contempt and his defiance in the face of what could possibly be his death, unless he found a way to escape.

“Thaddeus Ross,” stated Tony.

“Stark. You’ve ruined me.”
“Shouldn’t have given me a reason to ruin you,” retorted Tony, defiant.

“You could have been an asset to me if only you hadn’t gone behind my back with the Accords.”

Tony snarled. “They deserved to know. You lost your power because you refused to comply with the rules yourself. If you do not follow the rules, how do you expect others to do so in your name?” It was a valid point.

Ross stalked forward, a gun glinting in the dim light of the room they were in.

“You’ve ruined everything for me, Stark. People have tried to silence you before. Unlike them, I will not fail.”

The Winter Soldier tipped Tony’s head back, holding him securely in place.

“They’ll come for me.”

“No, they won’t.” Ross reached into his pocket and pulled out several bullets, inserting them into the gun. “They have no idea where you are. You’re dead, Stark.”

He raised the gun at Tony and fired.

To be continued...
Many thanks to JediPanda22 for another illustration of this story with one of the cliff-hanger to this chapter! Please check out their other artwork on Instagram at JediPanda22.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

If anyone has seen Spider-Man: Far From Home, you will recognise William Ginter Riva as the man helping Quentin Beck and he doesn't like Tony very much because he couldn't succeed at making the Arc Reactor smaller in Iron Man. I think it was a stroke of genius to bring him back and I figured it would probably be around now Quentin Beck would be getting fired from Stark Industries and forming his little 'I hate Tony Stark' group. It made sense for me for the group to potentially already be operating so they've been used in this fic though Beck himself isn't a part of it.

Ross has nothing left to lose and wants to kill Tony. He knows he has committed treason by lying to the President and is aware he will spend the rest of his days in prison.
The next chapter may be posted on Saturday as Sunday we have a big family lunch so I may post a day early... If not it will be late on Sunday.

Until next time,
the-writer1988
Chapter Ten: The Connection

Chapter Summary

Natasha, Rhodey and Steve rush to save Tony.

Chapter Notes

My apologies for not updating yesterday. We had a big family event going on and it was just impossible to update yesterday. But it is here now! I hope it is worth waiting the extra day for!

Just a warning for this chapter: Ross may have gone slightly insane... But he has lost everything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TEN

The Connection

Wednesday 22nd June 2016

The bullet tore into his thigh, tearing through ligaments and muscles and striking the bone, burying deep into his leg.

Tony screamed, trying to jerk away but the steel grip of the Winter Soldier on his hair prevented him from twisting away. Breathing heavily, he forced himself to look up at Ross. “You missed.”

“I shot you where I wanted to, Stark.” Ross walked slowly towards him until the butt of the gun was pressing against Tony’s head. “Blowing your brains out will be the last thing I do.” He shifted his aim and fired again, only this time into Tony’s already injured shoulder.

“Your downfall… is… your… own…” Tony panted, trying to ignore the pain shooting through his whole body. Fresh blood leaked from the two wounds in his leg and his shoulder. “You know… before… you kill me… How did you manage it?”

Ross scrutinised him. “To get you? You have many enemies, Stark, some just waiting for a chance to be given a shot at you. You’ve been under my surveillance for a long time. After you unleashed Ultron, I visited you at your new Compound, remember?”

Tony froze. He remembered. For him, it was such a long time ago but for Ross, it was only a year ago. “The world was already turning against the Avengers. Surveillance was needed. The people you hired to build the new Compound were also under our pay salary with strict instructions to lay the groundwork for undetectable surveillance to be built into it. Only certain areas are covered. Your office for one. Just a tiny camera, small enough to be undetectable, always recording every moment of the day. Your little hidden draw was not so hidden to me. I saw you install it. I know
how it works. I know it needs finger-print recognition. Easy to add another finger-print to a system once you have a way in, isn’t it? William is quite skilled with computers.”

Tony gritted his teeth. Ross had always been one step ahead of them. “Espionage, that’s how you did it. You always had a backdoor.” If the cameras had been installed before Tony had added FRIDAY, no wonder she wouldn’t have detected the other system. It was a basic system, a small camera that probably had no links to the mainframe.

“Naturally. It was easy for William to hack into your secure files and find everything we needed to know. Once you have a backdoor, it can be used as many times as we liked.”

“And coffee? You drugged us…”

Ross laughed. “Very easy. One of the domestics was on my payroll as well as yours. She refilled the sugar pot the night before with a sleeping agent. The coffee would have been too predictable. And I know you have plenty of sugar in your coffee, Stark. You never suspected a thing.”

Tony glared at his captor. “And who came into my office to steal the Red Book?”

“The domestic did. Once you were out she went in, took what she needed, and left but made sure to leave a mess behind. Make it look authentic at least. She is now far away from here. I paid her quite handsomely to carry this off. She is now far away from here. I paid her quite handsomely to carry this off. No one will be able to identify her. You’ll be dead and this information will not make its way back to anyone. We won’t be leaving this room alive, Stark.”

So he’d been right to predict Ross’s plan. Tony smirked. “So you’ll frame an innocent man for your crimes?”

Ross laughed. “Barnes is hardly innocent. He’s killed many people in his time. We will be his last victims. I kill you, he kills me and then he has orders to wait until we are found and then he will be charged with our murder. His numerous crimes will be leaked and his fate will be sealed.”

The Winter Soldier did not move from behind Tony. He was fully aware of what his orders were and could not countermand them himself. He was in Ross’s complete control, holding Tony steady.

“I have four bullets left, Stark. Where shall I shoot you next?”

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Natasha leaned back in the chair frustrated by the lack of progress. Her left shoulder burned with pain and her thigh was throbbing. She didn’t know why. She assumed she’d overstretched herself fighting but it didn’t make sense.

She was trawling through security footage of the tunnel where they knew vehicles had been swopped. It was tiresome work. Tracking every single vehicle and finding where it went to see if it would lead to any clues as to which one now held Tony. Or where it had taken him. They’d already sent Rhodey to investigate for any secret pathways from the tunnel. He’d found nothing.

“Ouch!” A burning pain shot up her wrist and she rubbed it. It hurt like hell. Where was this pain coming from? It felt like the burn from gunshot wounds…

Natasha paused.

Tony had been shot in the shoulder and she had an ache exactly where he’d been injured…
She closed her eyes and tried to calm her racing heart. Focusing her mind upon the area of her wrist, which still burned, Natasha sought her way through the pain and she found herself looking out of Tony’s eyes. In front of him was Ross, holding a gun at him. She couldn’t hear what was being said but she knew he was in trouble and he’d been shot multiple times, judging by the burning pain she could feel through his whole body. He remained defiant. Not scared, determined to meet his fate with dignity if he was to die here today.

Tony? She tried, hoping he might answer her.

He didn’t.

Ross aimed the gun, swerving it around in the air, talking to Tony as he undoubtedly tried to decide where he was going to wound Tony next. Clearly there was only one way this would end: Tony would be shot dead.

Natasha pulled herself away, trying to bring herself back to her body. It felt like she had seen into Tony’s soul. Her very body tingled as if they were now linked. She knew where he was. She could feel him, not far from where she was. His soul was burning in her brain, leading her to him.

Even when she opened her eyes she still felt the tug of his soul on hers. The burning of his soul urged her forward in her steps.

“Steve…” she said, reaching where Steve was going through his own data from the tunnel. “I know where Tony is.”

“You do? Where is he?”

“Not far from here. He’s been taken to a hotel near the airport. In the basement.” She could feel him close to the airport. It was only a twenty-minute drive… twenty minutes Tony did not have.

“Did you track one of the vehicles there?” asked Steve.

She nodded. She couldn’t tell him she seemed to have a connection to Tony which told her where he was. She’d only just learned of it. She didn’t understand it. She wondered if Tony had noticed her presence. “Ross was smart. He was always going to be close by. They’ve gone in the complete opposite direction to which they originally went. They thought they could outsmart us. They didn’t. But I don’t think we have long. Rhodey and I will travel ahead. You follow our beacons.”

“Why can’t –” Steve started but Natasha interrupted.

“We do not have time to discuss this, Steve.” She turned and ran out the room, already pulling out the smaller Arc Reactor Tony had given her and attaching it to her chest.

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Tony panted. His wrist hurt. Ross had ordered the Winter Soldier to release one of his arms and hold it up for Ross to shoot. The bullet had torn through his wrist but was lodged halfway through. Blood was leaking down his wrist. Tony was sure the bullet had nicked a major artery yet it seemed to be stemming the blood flow.

“You know… if you had been receptive to changes in the Accords, this wouldn’t… have… happened,” gasped Tony.
“The Accords were perfect as they were before you meddled with them. We need to control the Avengers. To send you where you are needed to be only and not waste time dealing with terrorists like Brock Rumlow.”

Tony winced. “You do realise nothing bad happened in Lagos, right? There were no reported injuries, no deaths… We even notified the government to ensure we had permission to act, and the relevant authorities were involved. We’re supposed to safeguard human life… The Accords work. But you cannot force people to go somewhere where they shouldn’t be. Nor is it legal for us to be detained without trial. All those -”

“Shut up!” Ross walked forward and pressed the gun to Tony’s head.

“Shoot me, you know you want to.”

Ross snarled. “Not yet.” He walked away. “I’m not done with you.”

“The more you shoot me, the more this looks like you did it.” Tony attempted to shrug but roaring pain ran through his shoulders. “Sending me that note was not a smart move. I knew you’d try something.”

“And yet you still made yourself vulnerable,” smirked Ross, his eyes glinting.

“Everyone is going to know you killed me. Not the Winter Soldier. Even if he shoots you dead, you’ll still be vilified as a villain in the public’s eyes,” snarled Tony. “It doesn’t matter if I played right into your trap. I know help is coming.”

“You’re a fool.” Ross waved the gun around in the air.

Tony smirked. “I wouldn’t under estimate Natasha Romanoff.” Because he could feel her in his head, probing around could almost feel they were joined together in soul. He didn’t know how she was doing it but she was there, with him.

Tony?

Her voice reverberated inside his head.

He didn’t answer. Couldn’t allow himself to be distracted.

“Three bullets to go. The last one is going in your head, Stark.” He walked forward. “I’d quite like to shoot you in the heart but doing so would be a waste… You’d be dead before I can blow your brains out.” He pressed forward until the butt of the gun was pressed against Tony’s stomach. “Will I shoot you in the head from the top or up through the chin? But first…”

Tony flinched, jerked as the bullet went into his stomach.

“Let him go,” Ross ordered.

The Winter Soldier released Tony and he fell, slumping to the floor, gasping in pain.

“If I know my anatomy correctly that bullet should have gone into your stomach. Your stomach acid will leak and you’ll suffer serious internal damage. Before it can kill you…”

“You’ll shoot me in the head… I know!” He almost wanted this to be over. Intense pain was ripping through his entire body. He couldn’t even lift himself up from the floor. His blood covered the floor. He couldn’t even feel the hand Ross had shot.
“One more place to shoot before your brains… Where shall it go, Stark? Maybe I’ll let you choose?”

Tony scoffed. “Yeah, right, as if I’m going to give you ideas…” he wheezed.

“Soldier, turn him onto his front.”

Grabbed by the Winter Soldier, Tony was forced onto his front, head pressed down onto the floor.

“Remove his shirt.”

Sticky with blood soaking through it from the stomach wound, the Winter Soldier cut the clothes off, leaving Tony on the floor shivering from the cold room and the lack of blood running through his body. His heart was beating faster than it should as it tried to compensate for the loss of blood.

Ross knelt down beside Tony’s body, running the butt of the gun down his spine before moving the gun to the level where the kidneys were usually found.

“You don’t need two kidney’s – ”

And that was when the door flew open.

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Because of the nature of the attack, the remaining Accords committee had already sanctioned a rescue mission, meaning Rhoyed and Natasha didn’t need to seek permission to rescue Tony. She knew they were running out of time. Thankfully the two Iron Man suits quickly made it to the hotel where Natasha could feel Tony.

“We haven’t got time to waste, Rhodey,” breathed Natasha, one hand over her abdomen, feeling pain running through her body. Ignoring the check-in clerk at the hotel counter, they pushed past and into the corridor. She could feel Tony beneath them.

Finding a lift they took it down to the bottommost level – the service level, located beneath the ground floor of the hotel and where guests never go.

“He’s close…” Natasha still had her suit on, as did Rhoyed. Smaller and lithe, she was able to run down the corridor before stopping at a metal door labelled ‘No Entry’. She pointed at it. “Blow this door in. He’s in there.” She could sense his pain through there.

Rhoyed urged her to step back, raised his arm and fired a repulsor shot right at the door, blowing it open on its hinges.

Stepping through the smoke, Natasha and Rhoyed walked into the room. The Winter Soldier came at them. Natasha ducked underneath his attack leaving Rhoyed in his War Machine armour to tackle the threat he posed. Her main concern was Tony.

She collided with a body, heard a gun-shot and a cry of pain before she was twisting her legs around the body and pulled them down with her. The smoke was beginning to dissipate, clearing her vision and she saw Ross on the floor, glaring at her before he scrambled towards the gun he had dropped in her attack of him. Launching herself forward she reached out, aiming a punch at his head and punched him hard in the side of his head.

Ross went down like a light, her gauntlet hand leaving blood-red marks on the side of his head. She picked up the gun and saw Tony lying on the floor, his body covered in blood.
“Tony!”

Running forward and then kneeling beside him, she carefully turned him over. The last bullet had hit his right elbow. Looking down she saw the trail of blood in his left wrist. It was a mess. He was unconscious but breathing.

“Stay with me, Stark. I cannot do this without you.” Gently laying him on the floor, she moved across to Ross, flipped him over and pulled out a set of handcuffs from her utility belt, chaining both his wrists and ankles together. Then she took a risk to look outside the room, in the corridor where Rhodey had the Winter Soldier pinned against the wall. He didn’t need her help. Turning back, kneeling down beside Tony’s body, she retraced her suit and pulled out a medical kit and started to wrap the various wounds that littered Tony’s body.

He needed treatment and fast.

“What the hell did Ross do to him?” Rhodey stepped into the room.

“Shot him a few times,” answered Nat, placing a bandage on Tony’s wrist and circling around it to stop the blood from continually leaking. “There is one in his stomach. We need to get him to a hospital.” She hesitated then, glancing up at Rhodey. “Is Bucky Barnes okay?”

“He is. I managed to knock him out quite quickly. He found it difficult to get through my armour. Yours he might be able to sustain damage to.” Rhodey moved forward, his bulky suit having trouble fitting through the door. “I’ll take Tony. I’ll be careful with him. Nearest hospital?”

Natasha nodded. They had no other choice. They were in Vienna. Away from the Avengers facility and they couldn’t afford to waste in getting Tony treatment. “Call in Helen Cho. As soon as Tony is stabilised we’ll get him back to the Avenger’s facility but for now we need to trust in the local doctors to help him before we lose him.”

Finishing bandaging the various wounds, Natasha stepped away as Rhodey knelt down, slid his arms underneath his friend’s and body and hefted him into the arms.

“Go.” Natasha urged. “I’ll deal with Ross.”

“Authorities are already on their way,” added Rhodey as he turned and walked away.

“I’ll follow when I can.” As much as Natasha wanted to stay with Tony, she had to ensure Ross was captured and tried for his crimes. Bucky could now be reunited with Steve and begin treatment for his own personality differences.

Apart from the little hiccup with Tony’s injuries, everything was running smoothly.

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By the time she made it to the hospital, Tony was already in surgery.

“Pepper is on her way over,” explained Rhodey.

“Naturally. Did they say anything about the prognosis?”

“They did a CT. Multiple bullet wounds: two in the right shoulder, one through the back and one in the front, his thigh as well as wrist and elbow and his stomach. They’re operating on him now to remove them. The worst injury is his stomach…”
She could see Rhodey was worried. “He’ll be alright.”

“We cannot say it for certain yet…”

“No, but I believe he will be,” answered Natasha. *We were both sent back for a reason. What was the point of sending Tony back if he dies before Thanos has even arrived? It didn’t make sense. Rhodey didn’t know the Tony he knew had memories from a life he had already lived.*

“He was shot in the stomach, Nat. He’s having major surgery to repair the damage. His wrist… God knows what his wrist will be like when they fix it if they can! He could lose it because of where the bullet has hit.”

_He’ll be fine._

The mysterious voice echoed in her mind. She hadn’t heard it in a while but now it was offering her reassurance.

“Rhodey… trust me. Tony will be fine.”

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Pepper sat next to Tony’s bed. He was still sleeping off the anaesthetic. He’d come round a few times since returning to his room after his surgery but he hadn’t been truly awake. He’d been unaware of where he was before falling back into the blessed slumber of dreams. His wounds were serious and he’d need a few weeks in hospital before he was given the all-clear to fly home. Tony didn’t know that yet. He wouldn’t be happy when he found out.

Rhodey and Nat were also sat around Tony’s bed.

“What’s going to happen to happen to Ross?” asked Pepper quietly.

“Incarcerated immediately,” stated Natasha. “I made sure he was turned over to the relevant authorities. Once Steve arrived at the location, he swiftly took control of the situation. He’s overseeing Bucky Barnes and what happens to him now. Barnes has been controlled for years. He’s had no say in what he does through no fault of his own… It’s time he was given the chance to live a normal life with help and therapy from people who are in a position to help him. I’m sure Steve will be a huge factor in this.”

“Good. I will be pressing charges against Ross,” confirmed Pepper. Her eyes were hard and she looked determined.

“You and a few other people will be,” noted Rhody. “He’s the reason why the attack happened. Ross will not be seeing the outside world for years. If he lives that long… He’s looking at decades for this.”

“I’ll make sure he never becomes a threat again.” Pepper’s voice was hard. She was determined and focused on this matter.

Nothing would be able to stand in her way of ensuring Tony’s safety.

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_Friday 24th June 2016_

Consciousness slowly returned to him. He knew he’d been wavering in and out of it for hours now.
He felt like he’d been run over and his whole body ached with pain.

“Tony? Honey… shh… It’s alright. You’re safe."

He was groaning. He knew. His eyes slowly opened and his vision focused upon Pepper’s face looking over him. “Hey, Pep.” He smiled lightly. “I… hurt…”

“You’ve had surgery, Tony. Your body is still recovering. You need to rest.”

“I think… I’ve… rested… enough…”

Her hand was running through his hair, soothing him. “They’ve kept you sedated for a bit longer, just to give your body that little bit extra time to heal. They were going to bring you out of the anaesthetic after the surgery but they wanted to keep you under just a little bit longer.”

Tony blinked, still feeling drowsy, turning his head to the other side. The sleepiness was slowly fading leaving him far more aware.

“Hey, Nat,” he whispered.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Could be better…” he sighed, shifting in the bed. “I… wanna… know… one… thing…” He struggled to say the words, exhaustion from talking overwhelming him.

“What?” Natasha leaned forward.

“Why… did… I… feel… you… in… my… head?”

With those last words, Tony’s eyes fell shut.

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Pepper glanced up at Natasha sitting quietly to Tony’s other side. “What did he mean? Feeling you in his head?” Thankfully Rhodey had stepped out to bring them lunch otherwise Tony’s words would have been very awkward to explain, especially since Rhodey had no idea about Tony and Natasha’s true history.

Natasha winced. “I think… Tony and I are connected.”

“Connected?”

“I could feel it each time he was shot,” admitted Nat. “I didn’t know for sure until I arrived there and saw where his injuries were. But we have a link… I tracked him because of it. I somehow… saw through his eyes,” explained Natasha. “I cannot explain it… or why, or how this link now exists. We didn’t have it before we both came back. But something is linking us together.”

“The voice is,” reasoned Pepper. “You said you both hear it… That’s the link. If you can both hear it then you already had this link but if you’ve only been sent back in time why do you have the voice now? Tony said you both woke up here and it was with you. Why has it now suddenly appeared unless…” Pepper stopped and then gasped, realisation dawning over her. “Natasha, did you and Tony die?”

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

Well, Pepper figured out Nat and Tony died and were not just sent back during their sleep overnight as they had originally implied to her. I thought this was a good place to stop otherwise this chapter could go on forever...

Tony and Nat's connection will be explained later on in the story but they have a unique link. Can anyone guess as to why they have it?

Ross played a bit of a long game. He already had all the spy cameras set up during construction of the Avengers Facility so was able to spy on the Avengers if he wished to. He didn't always use it.

Tony's draw where he hid the red book was actually quite secure since it had a digital lock on it so it was quite a secure place to hide something if he wanted. Unfortunately, Ross had already pre-empted that and he'd already seen where it was located through his spy-camera. Hopefully, this answers anyone's questions on how Ross knew where the Red Book was and how it was stolen. It was, technically, an inside job.

The next chapter should be posted on time for next Sunday. I have a lot of time this week to write and I am determined to keep my weekly schedule.

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Eleven: Next Steps

Chapter Summary

Tony recovers and plans ahead with Natasha.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating. I fell sick over holiday and couldn't really write. I'm still ill but recovering. I may not update this weekend but we'll see as I am trying to keep up with regular weekly Sunday postings. But I am behind as I only just finished this chapter today so update this Sunday may not be possible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Next Steps

Friday 24th June 2016

“Natasha, did you and Tony die?”

Natasha hesitated. “It’s complicated…” she answered. It was the best way to describe their situation.

“How is it complicated? It is a simple question,” responded Pepper. “Did you die?”

Natasha’s shoulders slumped. She couldn’t avoid answering. Pepper had made an educated guess on the little information she had been given. The fact they could now hear a voice and did not really know what the voice was, was a big clue as to how Tony and Nat had truly returned to the past. “We did die.”

“How?”

“We both sacrificed our lives,” she admitted. It was the truth after all. Natasha had willingly jumped to her death giving Clint the opportunity to take the Soul Stone and see his family again and Tony… Tony had wielded the powers of the universe and saved them all, at the cost of his own life. “We had to. We had to make the difficult choice to do so. When I died I remember it going completely black. And then I woke up back here in 2014, just before Hydra was exposed. All I had was a voice in my head telling me what I had to do. I freaked out at first, tried to tell someone but I couldn’t. I was physically stopped from doing so. All I knew was someone would be joining me but I had to wait for their arrival. I was here for two years before Tony arrived. And the only reason I guessed it was him was that he got himself involved in an event he’d not been around for previously. Everything else played out as it was supposed to. I couldn’t change a thing… couldn’t halt Ultron or stop Bruce from disappearing…”
“I’m sorry you’ve had to live through that again…” Pepper looked down at her hands. “How did Tony die?”

“I do not really know… Not for certain anyway. I had already died… I think you need to talk to Tony. Neither of us wanted to tell you that we’d died… We didn’t want to worry you. Tony wanted to protect you from the full truth… Don’t hate him for it… He doesn’t want to lose you.”

“But I lost him…” murmured Pepper quietly. “Where you are from, I lost him.”

“We have a chance to stop it, Pepper,” explained Natasha quietly. “What happened to take our lives can be stopped but we have to work as a team. Tony and I hope we’ve been sent back so after we’ve completed our tasks we can live our lives. The lives we should have kept in the first place. But there is always the possibility we are still meant to die.”

Pepper fell silent, her eyes falling from Natasha’s face. There was conflict in her features.

“Don’t leave him, Pepper. He needs you,” whispered Natasha, aware she shouldn’t be interfering in their relationship. She knew how Tony would feel if Pepper left him.

“I need him too. Tony has been a part of my life for so long…” whispered Pepper, “but the thought of him having died… Was I even there? Was he comforted? I know from where he came from we were married because he knew about my past… Did we have children? Was I left to raise them alone?”

“Pepper…” Natasha reached out and gently took Pepper’s hands in her own. She glanced at Tony in the bed, still out-cold. “Please talk to Tony. He needs you more than you know. I know it may be hard for you to want to stay knowing it was death which brought us back.”

Pepper’s lips twitched. “I don’t think I could walk away from him forever. Going on a break was difficult enough…”

“You took the risk before…” added Natasha. If Pepper walked away from Tony she wasn’t sure what she would do. Tony needed Pepper just as much as she needed him. Their lives were so intertwined that it seemed impossible they could be apart. But could Pepper take the risk knowing Tony had already died?

There was a moan from the bed and both women turned their heads to look at Tony who was gradually waking up again. He was having moments of consciousness before falling back asleep but each period was getting longer and longer.

“Hey, Pep…” His voice was soft as he sought out Pepper.

“Hey…” whispered Pepper, leaning forward and taking his hand. “I’m here. I’m not leaving you.”

The words she chose were curious at best and Natasha wondered if that was a hint to her she had already made up her mind whether to stay with Tony or not.

“Thirsty…” Tony whispered.

Pepper reached out for a glass with a top on and a straw inserted into the top. “Be careful.” She tipped the glass towards Tony’s mouth and he took the straw and sucked, drinking in the cold, soothing water to hydrate his parched throat.

“Thanks…” Tony weakly smiled. It would take a few days for him to recover. He’d lost a lot of blood and his wounds were still healing. His eyes began to close again until he drifted off.
“I’m not going to abandon him…” Pepper continued quietly. “I love him. And I will do everything in my power to make sure he lives. Whatever happened in your future needs to be prevented. I will support him as best as I am able. And I will talk to him.”

Natasha allowed a small smile to cross her face. “Thank you, Pepper.”

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The doctors were quite surprised by how quickly Tony’s injuries healed after surgery. He was ready to fly home a few days later though he was under strict instructions to not do any heroics. Tony didn’t mind. He was quite happy to spend a few days with Pepper. What he hadn’t expected was Pepper’s simple question when she laid a bowl of chicken soup in front of him and perched next to him on the sofa.

“You died, didn’t you?”

Tony nearly dropped the spoon. “What? I’m not sure what you mean?”

Pepper dipped her head. “I think you know. I figured it out. You died and you woke up here, didn’t you?”

Tony swallowed. “If I did, does it change things between us?” He watched her, his eyes focusing upon her beautiful face.

“No, Tony, it doesn’t. Dying is a risk I have always taken with you… I know you have to be Iron Man. I’d rather you didn’t but you were sent back for a reason. I hope it is so you can live after your work is done here…” She trailed off.

“But there is still a possibility death is still my fate,” finished Tony. He knew that. “I didn’t want to tell you because of scaring you away. I didn’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” said Pepper, leaning in and kissing him on the lips. “I said to you I would help you. I want to help you. I’ve like to have my own suit. I want to fight beside you.” She hesitated then but after a moment she slowly began to talk again. “If you die in battle, I want to be there with you because I think you would want me to be the last thing you saw.”

Tears gathered at the corner of Tony’s eyes. “You were the last thing I saw.” It was difficult to admit but Pepper being there, giving her permission that he could rest easily and not worry about those he loved, had helped in his final moments. He had drifted off thinking of her, seeing her face one last time… And then he’d woken up back in the past. “I don’t want you to have to go through that again. See me die…”

“Tony… My greatest fear is losing you. But I know you wouldn’t be able to rest if there were people out there you could help.”

“Those were your last words to me…” he replied quietly, his eyes moving down to the bowl of chicken soup, which he had now lost the appetite for. “You can rest now. You gave me peace when I needed it.” The tears trailed down his cheeks. “I left you… I left you to rais-” He stopped midsentence.

“Raise?” Pepper guessed. “We had a child?”

Tony minutely nodded not wanting to verbally confirm. He missed Morgan so much. He wanted to hold her in his arms and never let her go again.
“You don’t want to tell me,” reasoned Pepper.

“I worry if I do… they will not ever exist and… god…” Tony trailed off. He didn’t want to endanger Morgan’s existence by telling Pepper about her. The pressure would be on her. He knew the date and time of conception and that was something Tony would never tell Pepper. If the Morgan he knew was to exist he had to keep that specific information away from her, at least until after Morgan was born. That’s if he survived long enough for Morgan to be conceived. There was always a chance she wasn’t supposed to.

“You’ll see them again,” promised Pepper. “I know you will.”

Tony hoped he would. Slowly he picked up the spoon and dipped it into the soup. He attempted to change the subject. “So… a suit? I know the perfect design for you.”

“So you want me?” she teased.

“Of course…” he grinned. “As soon as I’m better I shall get started.”

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“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Steve asked as he approached the room Bucky was being held in. They’d all flown back to the US on the same flight Tony and Pepper had been on. And Bucky had been transferred to a secure facility upstate.

Natasha glanced over her shoulder. “Steve, he’ll be fine. They’re not going to kill him. What he’s done was carried out under duress. This has been proven. But… he does need treatment and a secure hospital away from the public would be the best option for him. At least until we can figure out a way to remove the trigger words from his head.” She wasn’t keen on the idea herself of Bucky being secreted away in a facility however it would be the safest place for him apart from Wakanda, but as of yet, Wakanda wasn’t yet known to be technologically advanced. So they were not an option.

Thankfully Tony had already passed on respective notes and materials to the Accords committee regarding the Winter Soldier and how he had been a prisoner for seventy years, forced to carry out commands at a whim. They had sympathised with Bucky’s plight and had vowed to help him, providing, of course, the Winter Soldier could be brought in safely.

“I worry they’ll use Bucky…”

“The Red Book is safe,” said Natasha.

“Someone still stole it,” pointed out Steve.

“That was a mistake on our part…” admitted Natasha. “Avengers Facility was supposed to be safe.”

“Where is it now?”

Natasha reached into her pocket and pulled out the Red Book. “I have it. On me at all times. I have a meeting with the Accords panel to determine what the best use of it would be.”

“It should be destroyed,” stated Steve. “Incinerated, that way no one else can ever use it against Bucky again.”

“Maybe. But it could have its uses. And what if there are other Winter Soldiers out there?” She
knew there were but had no evidence to back it up. She hoped Bucky would be able to confirm it.

“How can we assume Bucky is the only one? Would Hydra really limit their Winter Soldiers to just one person?”

Steve sighed. “You could be right. But that book already fell into the wrong hands once, it can’t happen again.”

Natasha could understand Steve’s fears. “The only option at the moment is keeping this book with us. Avengers Facility has been compromised and Tony hasn’t been in the best shape to investigate yet. Once the security breaches have been fixed, I will not have to carry this book around with me. Bucky will be transferred back to our care once he has made significant progress. He’s going to a good place, Steve. I’ve seen it. You’ve seen it."

With the help of Pepper and the influence of Stark Industries, arrangements had been made to place Bucky at a secure facility where he would begin treatment for the mental and physical abuse he had suffered within the hands of Hydra. Their primary aim was ensuring he could be reintroduced to society. Once Bucky reached a certain point in his treatment, Tony had informed Natasha he hoped he could continue it at the Avengers Facility.

“Do you trust Tony, Steve?” asked Natasha. “He helped set this up long before Ross became a problem. He’s been putting in place the pieces he needs to help Bucky. Everyone here has gone through a verified check, double and triple checked.”

“I do trust him,” admitted Steve.

Natasha laid a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Then let us go and see your friend.”

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Bucky’s room was bigger than Steve had expected. It was comfy. He had a television. A double bed. An en-suite bathroom. It looked more like a small flat than a hospital. “You seem surprised…” said Bucky. His metal arm had been removed, something Bucky had consented to. Engineers had been called in to help design a new one, an arm that wouldn’t be considered lethal or could be used against others.

“I thought you’d be in a prison…”

“Tony isn’t like that, Steve,” warned Natasha. “You told me you trusted him.”

“I do.”

“Then you shouldn’t be surprised this isn’t a prison, Steve,” replied Bucky. “It’s nice. People want to talk to me. See how I am, what do I need? They are taking good care of me. I’m quite happy to stay here. I will have meetings with government officials, to discuss with them the crimes I committed under Hydra but everything needs to be assessed and looked at. I can have visitors whenever. There are no set times for you to follow. I’m not being treated like a criminal.”

“You shouldn’t have to be questioned by the government. It isn’t fair on you,” said Steve quietly.

“How do you expect people to learn who were victims of Hydra if Bucky doesn’t help them?” asked Natasha. “The people who lost loved ones to Hydra’s scheming deserve to know the truth. The government will not be pressing charges. Others may but they are likely to be turned down from the court because Bucky had no choice in the missions he was given. He was trained to be a merciless killer with no emotion, no individual thought, just with the mind-set to carry out his tasks and to flee if required. Bucky cannot be convicted of any crime whilst in the state of the Winter
Soldier. If he committed crimes as Bucky, he would be able to be held accountable. We all are.”

And that is what Steve didn’t understand before. Bucky had still committed crimes as himself, ones he had to be held accountable for. If Steve had listened to others and considered other options, we wouldn’t have had to become fugitives. I wouldn’t have had to betray Tony. I knew Steve wouldn’t stop. I had to help him.

She did regret helping Steve at the airport but it was the only way to avoid casualties as Steve was determined to do things his way and no one else’s way. Someone could have died.

True Ross had had it out for Bucky but that was only because he had been deemed dangerous. Once it had become clear Steve was fighting to protect Bucky, it had been Tony’s quick thinking and reasoning to convince Ross to bring in the Winter Soldier. If Steve had appealed himself, the chase through the tunnel, resulting in several casualties, could have been avoided entirely.

Steve needed to learn to communicate and trust others to make the right decision. She knew he was finding it hard to work under the Accords and he was trying. She had to give him credit for that.

And I know after trusting SHIELD only to learn they were infiltrated by Hydra that he cannot easily put his faith in governments. That’s why he can only trust himself… Steve had been tarnishing everyone with the same brush even after all of the Hydra agents had been exposed. And she could understand it. But he was trying to adapt.

At least they had a chance now to face each problem as a team. They could all stand together and face Thanos as one unit without splitting apart. They already had an advantage they didn’t have before.

“You’re alright, Buck?” Steve asked. “They’re not forc-”

“No, they’re not.” Bucky interrupted before Steve could finish his sentence. “If it means getting Hydra out of my head I’m happy to receive help.”

“I’ll come by every day,” said Steve.

Bucky shook his head. “No, every other day.”

Steve pursed his lips. “Fine.”

Bucky turned his attention to Natasha. “How’s your friend? Stark?”

“Recovering. He doesn’t blame you.”

“Recovering. He doesn’t blame you.”

“I know… He should do.” Bucky winced. “I was in Romania, just in my apartment, when someone knocked on the door. I’d got to know my neighbours quite well despite my best efforts to keep a low profile… I answered… That man was there. Ross? Is that his name?”

“It is,” stated Steve angrily. “He used you.”

“He had the Red Book and used it on me. I tried to fight it. I tried to stop him. Tried to attack him… But he had soldiers there who stopped me. They came through the door…” he shivered.

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Natasha. “Ross wanted to hurt Tony anyway. If it wasn’t you, it would have been someone else.”

“I just stood there, in that room, whilst your friend was shot repeatedly… I had orders to watch and wait until Stark was dead, and then shoot Ross in the head. Make it look like it was me who did
it… Tell me he is going to prison for what he did?” Bucky asked, leaning forward.

“Oh, he is, for good. There is no way he can walk out of this one. He was already facing the courts for treason. He’s just made it a lot worse for himself.” Natasha couldn’t help but smile vindictively. “Ross has lost for good. And you, Bucky, have a chance to live a normal life.”

A slight smile tugged at Bucky’s lips. “I do not deserve it.”

“You do. Everyone deserves a second chance. I was given one and look how I turned my life around.” Natasha pointed out. Her own past was a good place to start. “I was an assassin, got on SHIELD’s radar in a bad way… Instead of killing me, they gave me a chance. I turned over a new leaf. You can too. This is your chance.”

“I’m grateful.”

Natasha stepped away. “Steve, you alright if I leave? See you back at the compound later?”

“You’re taking the car?” Steve asked.

Natasha shook her head. “No. I have my own suit. I’ll fly back. You can take the car.” She tossed him the keys which he caught.

“I really want to know when you started using your own suit…” said Steve.

Laughing over her shoulder, Natasha waved a hand. “Maybe I’ll tell you later!”

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Monday 4th July 2016

FORMER SECRETARY ROSS CHARGED WITH KIDNAPPING AND ATTEMPTED MURDER

The former Secretary-General, Thaddeus Ross, was today charged with multiple offences, including the kidnap and attempted murder of billionaire entrepreneur and superhero, Tony Stark. A trial date has yet to be set. Ross has been remanded in custody and will have no chance of bail. A spokesperson for Mr. Stark said: “We are pleased to confirm Mr. Stark has made a full recovery and will follow the trial closely in addition to his duties as a member of the Avengers and of the Accords Committee.”.

The Winter Soldier, known as Bucky Barnes, was under the control of the former Secretary-General. His orders were to acquire Tony Stark and bring him to a safe location where Ross was waiting. Ross intended to kill Stark and in turn be murdered by the Winter Soldier, framing both their deaths on the Winter Soldier.

Stark suffered multiple wounds prior to his rescue and extraction by Natasha Romanoff and Colonel James Rhodes. Ross and the Winter Soldier were apprehended at the scene. The Winter Soldier is currently held in a secure environment where he will begin treatment for his seventy years’ worth of brainwashing at the hands of HYDRA in an effort to restore him to full health and reintroduce him into society. In return, it is expected Barnes will co-operate with authorities to determine who he was forced to kill for HYDRA. An inside source has confirmed HYDRA was responsible for the deaths of many high-profile talents.
Tuesday 5th July 2016

Tony tapped his fingers on the table. “So… next steps? The Accords are sorted. Ross is out of the way. The Avengers are still together. Barnes is receiving treatment. Peter has me as a Mentor. I have Pepper back… What’s next?”

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “We need to prepare for Thanos. But before we move onto the subject, I wanted to ask why you haven’t spoken to me about how I managed to find you when Ross had you? We have a link, Tony…”

“Because it is weird. You saw through my eyes. I knew you were there…”

“But why do we have this link?” pressed Natasha. “Surely this is something worth talking about?”

“I think the reason is obvious,” stated Tony. “I’ve been trying to track you, to connect with you. I can’t. But you can with me. What did it feel like when you reached out to me?”

“Oh…” Natasha breathed. “It felt like I was tracking your soul... Oh!” Realisation struck her. “The Soul Stone. I died because of the Soul Stone. I sacrificed my life for it…”

Tony nodded slowly. “What if you have been imbued with its powers? The ability to reach into other people’s souls and see through their eyes and have the unique ability to track them too?”

Natasha looked down at her hands. “I think it is only you, Tony, I am able to see into. I’ve tried with others… I get vague feelings from them but not deep ones like I received with you. Not enough information.”

“But you still have a connection. Those powers are handy if I ever get in trouble.”

“Which is all the time,” she interjected.

Tony mock glared at her. “Point taken.”

“But if I have these powers… powers I never had before… Shouldn’t you have something too? We both died by way of the Infinity Stones.”

Tony tilted his head. “You never used them. You gave your life so Clint could acquire the Soul Stone. I used all six. It burned me through completely. I was barely alive after using them. I doubt I’ve been imbued with powers of the stones. If I have they haven’t shown themselves to me and the best time would have been when Ross was shooting me.”

“Maybe it wasn’t the right time yet,” she suggested. “And you have healed rather quickly, something the doctors pointed out to you. You were shot multiple times and your recovery was quicker than anticipated.”

Tony frowned. She did have a point. “At this juncture, I’m going to say no. I think if I had powers they would have manifested themselves in some way. I wouldn’t have needed you to come and rescue me.”

Natasha eyed him carefully. “If that is what you feel…”
“Believe me, Nat, if I had powers we’d have known about it by now.” He glanced down at his datapad. “So, next steps. If everything runs to course, we have just less than two years before Thanos arrives here. We can plan a lot in that time. I’m going to focus on Wakanda and Spider-Man. I’ve got a meeting with Wakanda in a few weeks, an invitation from the King. I alluded to him I knew how technologically advanced they were. We’ve got to bring them in, start designing something which protects the whole world which isn’t on the scare of Ultron. There are some things I will not interfere with though. Adrian Toomes, the guy who Peter faced… that needs to happen. It was his learning curve but I’ll keep an eye on the situation. Those are my plans for the future. You?”

Natasha sighed. “We need to bring in Carol Danvers. I’m going to get Fury to get us to call her in.”

“He’ll be hard to convince.”

“I know but I’ve got to try. Once Carol is here, we’ve got to start thinking about retrieving the Stones before Thanos can get a hold of them. The key to winning this is stopping him from assembling them in the first place.”

“And then Thanos will come here for them all. We need to scatter them, Nat, so he never gets his hands on any of them.”

“Or destroy them.”

“Might be difficult.”

“Wanda can do it,” said Nat confidently. “She destroyed Vision.”

“And then Thanos used the time stone to turn back time…” noted Tony. He hadn’t been there for that event but had heard about it. “Which wouldn’t have happened if Strange hadn’t traded it for my life… though now I know why… I had to live.”

“That was unfortunate but we can save Vision. Shuri, T’Challa’s sister, was working on removing the Stone safely from Vision’s head before the army attacked. If we can bring them on-board we could safely remove the Mind Stone without harming Vision. And then Wanda could destroy the stones. If we could get the stones before Thanos we can eliminate their threat entirely. He won’t ever be able to collect them,” continued Natasha. “It’s the only way to win this. Eliminate the stones before they become a problem. And for that we need Danvers, we need the Guardians… We need to start making connections. But, Tony, we have to do this ourselves. We have to be involved at every stage. We were sent back for a reason and I think this is it.”

Tony nodded. “I feel you’re right. How about we set ourselves a timetable? Wakanda needs sorting first. Let’s get Vision’s stone out before we move elsewhere. His life is too important to leave until last.”

“And the Time Stone? Any ideas for it?”

Tony frowned. “Not right now. That’ll come in part two when we’re thinking of the other stones.”

“At least it’s a start,” noted Nat. She rose from her seat. “Ok, you and Wakanda, Danvers and I are the next steps for now.”

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

The power Natasha has potentially does come from the Soul Stone so a few of you were right about that. But Tony hasn't shown any sign of powers himself yet unless you count quicker healing. Will he?

Yes, Pepper is going to be Rescue. She'll be working directly alongside Tony and Natasha.

Bucky is receiving proper treatment for his years as a prisoner for Hydra. And he will be getting a normal prosthetic arm at his request as a Winter Soldier arm would remind him too much of his tortured history.

This chapter marks the end of the Civil War storyline. The Accords are sorted, Bucky is getting good treatment, Ross is in prison and the Avengers are still together. Up next will be Wakanda, Spider-Man, Captain Marvel and the Guardians of the Galaxy before the Infinity Stone hunt gets underway.

I hope you all stick with me as we move into the next exciting storyline of 'Old Souls'!

Until next time (which may be this Sunday or the one after),

the-writer1988
Chapter Twelve: Wakanda

Chapter Summary

Tony and Pepper visit Wakanda...

Chapter Notes

Somehow I managed to get this chapter finished on time. I am recovered from my illness now and I am returning to work tomorrow... This chapter deals with Wakanda and Natasha sits in with the agents questioning Bucky on his activities as the Winter Soldier...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wakanda

Monday 25th July 2016

“It’s a shame we couldn’t use the Stark Industries jet to come here,” said Pepper, approaching Tony in the cockpit of the QuinJet. “It would feel a lot more diplomatic…”

Tony shrugged. “The world pays more attention to SI jets than they do to Avenger jets. Wakanda has always been secretive. We’ve been invited here by King T’Chaka. At his request, they asked us not to use a commercial plane. I don’t mind. It gives me a chance to pilot for once.” Tony leaned back in the chair, his hands on the controls.

“I just wondered since these jets are quite uncomfortable…”

“They’re not really meant to be used for travelling. Mainly for missions,” admitted Tony. “I haven’t been pushing her as hard as I could because you are on board.”

Pepper placed her arms on Tony’s shoulders. “You know… we could have used our suits…” she whispered into his ear. “But someone hasn’t finished it yet…”

“It will be ready for when it is needed,” replied Tony. “Besides, I’m sure they will appreciate it more if we are in an Avengers Jet. More technologically advanced than this and the tech in here is already ahead of its time.”

Pepper shook her head in wonder. “I can’t believe Wakanda is rich and is hiding advanced technology. From everything you’ve told me about what you know of it… it’s just surprising…”

“You’ll believe it when you see it. The only reason they’ve invited me here is that they suspect I know of their little secret. They’ve remained secluded from the outside world for so long, their suspicions are immediately raised as soon as someone may hint of letting their little secret out,
which I haven’t done, by the way. I just hinted I was aware of something. But we need Wakanda in this fight ahead. Their technology will make a big difference.” Tony sighed. “The problem is, is that the person who did bring Wakanda out into the world in my time isn’t currently King yet…”


“He was King by this point. His father was killed during the signing of the Accords in Vienna…Events were carried out differently this time... mainly because I pissed off Ross enough he went a little crazy,” explained Tony. “T’Chaka is still alive… He may not be so eager to open the borders as his son was. T’Challa never revealed why he chose to bring Wakanda out into the world but I think something must have happened between his father dying and T’Challa taking up the throne. I believe it may be more difficult to open up the borders…” Tony turned his attention back to the viewscreen. “We’re coming up on Wakanda’s borders. You might want to see this.”

Pepper settled into the seat behind Tony’s chair and leaned forward, her eyes scanning the skies as the QuinJet began to descend. “Where about in Africa is Wakanda located?”

“It is a very small area around Lake Turkana. Turkana runs straight through the centre of the country. Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia all border it. Interestingly, Wakanda has a lot of vegetation for its location. It is a rather green country whereas the countries bordering it are mostly desert and life is harsher. I’m not sure why there is such a difference.”

“But you have a theory?”

Tony grinned. “I do. But I’d like to wait and see if they reveal it to me first before I even tell you my theory.” He pointed the nose down towards the co-ordinates he had been given. “We’re going to be landing just inside the border. They’ll pick us up from there and escort us into their city.”

It was at that moment, as they crossed the border, a voice came over the communications channel, requesting they descend towards a field two miles away, where they would be met by the Prince’s delegation.

“I guess T’Challa will be escorting us in,” noted Tony. A wise move on their part. He’d never visited Wakanda before. He’d had no need to. He had always wanted to visit though and now this was his chance.

“There’s a lot of vegetation,” whispered Pepper. “Unusual for its location…”

“As I said, I have a theory…” smiled Tony. He kept the jet flying low over the grass, slowing the speed until he came to the designated field. Using the controls he hovered the QuinJet in the air, bringing it down onto its landing struts in the centre of the field. There was another jet standing by which looked far more advanced in technology than Tony had ever seen. Having not had the chance to visit Wakanda before, he hadn’t seen their tech up close. Now was his chance to learn something new and add to his knowledge. Unclipping his seat belt, Tony emerged from the pilot’s chair, grabbed his and Pepper’s bag and took her hand.

Together they walked down the ramp and out onto the field, fresh air hitting them in the face, cooling them instantly as they walked across the field towards the waiting Wakanda delegation.

T’Challa stood at the forefront, wearing ceremonial robes, marking his status as the heir to the throne.

“Prince T’Challa,” Tony bowed slightly, aware of the protocol that should be respected. Pepper curtseyled.
“Please… no bowing, Mr. Stark.” T’Challa walked forward and shook Tony’s and Pepper’s hands.
“Welcome to Wakanda. It is wonderful you could visit. We have had… problems the last few
weeks which resulted in a delay to your invitation to visit.”

“Oh.” Tony didn’t seem too surprised. “I hope all issues have been resolved now.”

“They have… I’m sure my father will explain more.” T’Challa turned his attention towards Pepper.
“Miss Potts, it is good to meet you. I understand if Wakanda chooses to work with Mr. Stark, you
will be our point of contact?”

Pepper nodded. “Yes, unless other arrangements can be given. At the moment Tony is busy with
the Accords and other duties which means he may be unable to fully work with you on this
endeavour he hopes to propose to you and your father and your country.”

“We will see… First, I shall take you on a tour of our lands before we travel to the capital city.”
T’Challa indicated the ship behind them. “Please, follow me.”

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Pepper breathed out in wonder at the magnificent views they were taken to, showing the true
beauty of Wakanda and the potential it held. She stood beside Tony, holding his hand as they both
glanced out towards a giant waterfall that ran through the centre of Wakanda. It was breathtakingly
beautiful. “Wow…” She turned to face T’Challa. “There are a lot more secrets to Wakanda than
the world knows. I’ve seen enough to know you are a country which is very well off. You do not
struggle as your neighbours do. The question I have is how? This technology here is ahead of
Tony’s. You could revolutionise the whole world.”

“There are those who would take advantage of our technology, Miss Potts. However Wakanda has
had an incident recently in which we are re-evaluating our position in the world,” explained
T’Challa smoothly.

“Then let me be the first to offer our aid if you do choose to open the borders,” replied Pepper,
smiling warmly. “Stark Industries is one of the most technologically advanced companies in the
world. I am sure our company and your own science division could work together to create
something truly wonderful which would not just benefit Wakanda but the world in general.”

“It is something we are considering…” motioned T’Challa.

“I think your country could probably benefit from a lot of tourists… if that was an option for your
country,” suggested Pepper, “though, with technological advancement, I suspect it isn’t something
you would be particularly keen on to do.”

T’Challa shook his head. “Not at the moment. But we do have an interest in investing elsewhere.
Isolation has protected us… however, we have much to give the world. Too much at once could
stun it. We need to be careful with what we roll out.”

“I agree,” Tony interrupted, squeezing Pepper’s hand tightly. “The world isn’t ready for some of
my advancements… What I’ve seen of yours, this airship? It’s too far advanced for the rest of the
world. If Wakanda is committed to joining the international community it needs to operate a phase-
in programme and then slowly reveal how far it is advanced over a period of several decades until
the world is ready to catch up. If Wakanda reveals itself, you will become a target. A big target. I
know that the scenario is not what you wish for your people.”

T’Challa sighed. “It is not.”
“I think if we work together we’ll be able to help each other out,” said Tony.

“I look forward to any future collaboration between our two countries, Mr. Stark.”

The Golden City was the capital of Wakanda. As the airship was piloted down towards the vast hanger of the Royal Palace, Tony cast his gaze out into the city. Throughout the tour T’Challa had given them, they’d seen various tribes working across the land of Wakanda, keeping it as fresh as possible and healthy to ensure the growth of crops. But the city was something else entirely.

It was a mixture of Wakanda and current advancements in technology. It was a bustling city with many tall structures and running through the city was a train, looking far advanced from any train Tony had seen before. The houses were quite modest, built strongly and able to withstand any weather.

The palace itself was truly spectacular, high spires into the sky, with wide windows. It looked out upon the city and backed out onto the forest and the plains.

The air-ship docked on the platform and T’Challa led Tony and Pepper out and into the Citadel itself, taking them through tall, bright corridors towards the throne room.

Sitting in the centre, in the throne itself, King T’Chaka awaited them. The throne room looked out onto the vast city beneath them and it was circular with glass flooring, allowing them to look down at the waiting room beneath. Queen Ramonda sat beside her husband in a green dress; her hands clasped together, her eyes scrutinizing the visitors.

“Father,” T’Challa bowed. “I would like to present Tony Stark and Pepper Potts.”

Tony and Pepper showed proper respect before standing straight and smiled warmly at the King and his wife. T’Challa moved to sit in the empty chair to T’Chaka’s right.

“Welcome to Wakanda, Mr. Stark.”

“Thank you, your majesty. Your country is truly remarkable. More than I expected for a country positioned where it is in Africa. You prosper well. There is no struggle for food or water. People can live a normal life. It is wonderful to see how far you have come,” replied Tony carefully. He knew they were already suspicious of the knowledge he had of their country.

“Yes… Mr. Stark, considering how quiet Wakanda is on the world stage, I’d like to know how you became aware that ‘we prosper well enough on our own?’” queried T’Chaka. “At the Accords signing, you hinted as much. Consequently, I am pleased to see you have made a full recovery from your ordeal.”

“Thank you,” smiled Tony. “I’m glad you both made it safely away.” He shifted on his feet a little bit. “As for knowing more then I should about your country? It was done unintentionally, no harm intended, and I would never sell the secret of your country to anyone, but I make A.I’s, or did, now the Accords have effectively ruled them out. They regularly scan the globe for any anomaly, technology or otherwise.” He was taking a guess here now as he needed to provide an adequate reason for how he knew of their advancement. “Sometimes I deploy drones to gather intelligence. One of them strayed into Wakandan land and caught a brief glance of technology that I had never seen before. I pulled the drone out as soon as I realised where it was.”

“Usually our borders would detect technology crossing it which shouldn’t be there,” intoned T’Chaka.
Tony wanted to curse.

“However, it has been known to happen. You are forgiven, Mr. Stark, and thank you for keeping our secret. We are grateful for your support in this matter.”

“It won’t happen again,” promised Tony. Though it hadn’t happened at all, T’Chaka didn’t know that. “I hope we can discuss the business of potentially working together?”

“We can, Mr. Stark. I am interested in bringing Wakanda out into the wider community however I feel we need to go about this carefully. Our technology is far more advanced than the world has seen before. What can you do for us?”

Pepper stepped forward. “I think I can answer that question, if I may, King T’Chaka?”

He motioned for her to do so.

“Stark Industries is a pioneer of a lot of new technology. The Iron Man armour itself is out of its time, far ahead of any type of armour currently on offer. Only Tony has the ability to create it, though I am certain your own technology makes Tony’s efforts look like child’s play. I propose we work together: the two science divisions to bring new technology forward, slowly showing the world what Wakanda is capable of.” Pepper swallowed. “We have an excellent reputation and seek to improve the world for all. I believe our goals can be met if we joined together to create a path to the future. Is this something you may be interested in?”

T’Chaka exchanged glances with his wife and son. “I believe it could be a potential avenue of interest for us to explore. I’m sure Mr. Stark would like to explore our scientist division?”

“Only if I am allowed to,” said Tony. “I would rather be invited to visit them than presume I already have the right to look in.”

“I’m sure Shuri will enjoy showing off, father,” chuckled T’Challa. “How about tomorrow, Mr. Stark?”

“Perfect.”

“I will think about your proposal, Miss Potts,” continued T’Chaka. “Discuss with my advisors. For now, I wish for you both to join us for dinner later. My son shall show you to your quarters. You will be here for five days?”

“We will,” answered Pepper. “If that is acceptable?”

“It is.” T’Chaka smiled. “Please, rest and we’ll catch up later.”

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Their room overlooked the plains. The stars shone out high above them, sparkling in the sky. The dinner had been a nice cuisine of African dishes, served in three courses with the King and Queen. They had now returned to their rooms for the night.

Pepper stood on the balcony, wearing her nightdress, peering out into the skies beyond. Her hair fell past her shoulders, curling slightly at the tips. “This place is wonderful.”

Tony approached her slowly, dressed in a t-shirt and night shorts, holding her by the shoulders and gently rubbing the exposed skin there. “Hey.” He pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck. “I never saw Wakanda before but I knew of the technological advancements. I’m glad I had the chance to
“Hopefully this isn’t the only time you’ll see it,” replied Pepper, leaning back into Tony’s embrace.

“I know it is nice to be looking out here but… come to bed…” Tony gently kissed up her neck, his lips soft and tender.

Pepper moaned. “Tony…”

“I love you…” His fingers moved down to her waist, his face in her hair.

Pepper turned around in his embrace, placing her hands on his shoulders. “I love you too.” She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly on the lips as he pressed their bodies closer together. Gently she pushed him back until the back of his legs hit the bed and he fell onto it, pulling Pepper with him.

His hands trailed across her cheeks as he looked tenderly at her. Leaning up he caught her in a kiss.

“Love you so much.”

“I know.”

Nestling together, they didn’t sleep until much later.

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**Tuesday 26th July 2016**

**State of New York**

“It’ll be alright, Steve.” Natasha patted Steve reassuringly on the arm. “Nothing is going to happen to him.”

Steve didn’t look convinced.

Today was Bucky’s first meeting with government officials regarding his actions as the Winter Soldier, meetings Bucky had agreed to. Natasha was to sit in on the meetings. It should have been Tony but he had asked the Accords Committee to consider Natasha for the role instead. After a consultation, Natasha had been selected. Steve had wanted to sit in himself but had been denied due to how close he was to Bucky. He had been allowed to sit and wait outside if he was that concerned.

“Trust me, alright?” urged Natasha. “It’s going to be fine.”

Steve sat down on the bench outside the office they had chosen to hold their meetings in.

Natasha opened the door and walked into the brightly lit room. Bookcases were stacked against the wall, filled with numerous books, the desk had been pushed to the side and three sets of chairs had been set up around a table where glasses of water had been provided. Natasha sat on a stool outside of the circle: her role was to observe and only intervene if it was necessary.

Bucky sat on the sofa, his shoulder slightly tensed as he considered the two government officials in front of him.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes. My name is Simon. I am a CIA agent as is my colleague, Miss Charlotte DuBank. We will be meeting with you every month for the next twelve months to
discuss your history with Hydra and any intelligence you may be able to give us, whether it is relevant now or no longer something we can act on.”

Charlotte leaned forward. “Miss Romanoff will be sitting in on these meetings to ensure you remain comfortable and we are not pushing you past the limits. These meetings can be long, can be short… It all depends on you. We are here to gather intelligence, not to interrogate you or to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Bucky nodded. “I already feel uncomfortable.”

Natasha watched their reaction.

“If you do not wish to proceed today we can always rearrange?” Simon suggested kindly.

Bucky shook his head. “I think I will always feel uncomfortable. No, I cannot avoid this… Let’s start… Even if I give you only one thing, it will be a start.”

Natasha nodded. This would be difficult for Bucky but she admired him for pressing ahead. The two agents were being very kind and helpful. All these meetings were supposed to be on Bucky’s terms and no one else. They were supposed to help him heal and accept what had happened to him had been out of his control, though she suspected Bucky knew that.

“We will start lightly. Please let us know if you wish us to stop,” said Simon. “Charlotte?”

“How much do you remember since you were captured by Hydra?”

Bucky remained silent for a short while. “I remember a lot more than I want to. They used to brainwash me so I would forget but it wasn’t making me forget, they just suppressed the memories. If I look deep enough I can recall certain murders. I don’t want to remember them… to know that these hands were responsible for multiple deaths and I wasn’t in control…”

“It must be terrible living the knowledge,” Simon said carefully.

“I killed people I knew, I worked with… Some even recognised me and I didn’t care. I killed them with my bare hands.” Bucky admitted.

“Are there any you want to talk to us about today?” enquired Charlotte.

Bucky inclined his head. “There is one… Steve told me he already knows… He, I mean Tony…”

Natasha’s eyes widened slightly. She hadn’t expected Bucky to admit to Howard and Maria Stark’s death this soon but it was good he was doing so. She didn’t feel she needed to intervene: this was Bucky’s choice to do so, to correct a misconception in history where it had been revealed to the public Howard had been drunk.

“Hydra wanted the new Super Soldier Serum Howard Stark had created. I was sent to retrieve it and leave no witnesses. I caused the car crash that night… I killed Howard and Maria Stark on Hydra’s orders. Howard recognised me but I paid no notice. I knew him… I had fought beside him with Steve… And I killed him.”

Simon and Charlotte exchanged glances at the reveal of information.

Charlotte clasped her hands together. “I see. Were you aware you were killing them at the time?”

Bucky shook his head. “No. Once the Winter Soldier takes over I’m not in control. I followed
orders. I remember the event after it but do not recall carrying out the orders.”

“The Winter Soldier is a separate personality to you then? One who takes over when the codewords are given?” Simon continued.

Natasha had briefed them on how Bucky had been activated. It was information they had needed to know prior to beginning their sessions.

“Yes. It’s not me. He has never been me. Those words are just a way to control me. Make me do things I would not do. I have no recollection of physically being there but I remember my victims, some more than others. The Starks are some of the more notable victims… I think Hydra wanted me to remember them, know what I did to people I worked with… Remembering some of them was another way for them to control me. I was never in a position to fight back.” Bucky turned his head away. “I wish I could have fought back. I’d have ended it before they could force me to do more.”

It was an admission Natasha had expected. Bucky’s life had been one of pain and horror. Hydra had never given him the freedom, only when they were in control of him and even then it was limited to the missions he was given.

“Would you say, now that you have been freed from Hydra’s control for two years, that you still feel that way?” Charlotte pressed carefully.

Bucky took a while to answer. “No…” he finally said. “Ever since I started to remember, I’ve wanted to try to reclaim who I was. Try to live my life quietly and not be dragged away again. In Romania, I was doing just that… blending in when I could and living day by day… Then Ross came…” He shuddered. “I could have been responsible for all the Stark’s deaths…”

Natasha winced at the revelation. It had nearly been a possibility.

“I remember… Quite a few years ago, back before Stark became a hero… Hydra wanted him. To use him. If he’d been there when I was sent to kill his parents… I wouldn’t have hesitated to bring him in. They never took many actions against Stark… Choosing to wait to see how much of a threat he could become or a potential ally.” Bucky swallowed, his fists clenching. “It wasn’t just Stark, there were others too.”

“How many people were you ordered to kill over the years?” Charlotte bowed her head forward, her eyes focussed upon Bucky.

“Hundreds. Sometimes I was sent out on a monthly basis… others weekly… The number of times I was woken over the years lessened…” admitted Bucky quietly.

“Why was that?” Simon enquired.

Bucky raised his gaze and focused on the two people in front of him. “I’m not the only Winter Soldier.”

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Wakanda

Shuri was simply amazing. Tony had to admit she was every bit as intelligent as T’Challa had said. Pepper was staying within the Citadel with Queen Ramonda and King T’Chaka where they would discuss the further advantages to beginning a partnership with Stark Industries. But Shuri? She put the entire Research and Development department at S.I to shame.
Princess Shuri was the leader of the Wakandan Design Group. The main laboratory was set up within Mount Bashenga and directly above the Great Mound. Within the mound was the world’s only source of Vibranium: the material which helped Wakanda advance beyond its years.

She showed him many different designs she had going, advanced communication devices, sound-absorbent boots, gauntlets, and spears. She was very energetic and quite pleased to be showing someone around with intellect which equalled hers.

“So… how long have you been part of the Design Group, Shuri?” Tony asked as he examined one of the Vibranium gauntlets.

“Quite a few years. Father used to bring me down here when I was little. It became known quite well the interest I had in engineering and the designs I created. I was given time here after educational days to study and learn my craft.” She moved to take the Gauntlet from Tony’s hands. “On and off, I’d say I’ve been here since I was quite young but officially as part of the Design Group? Since I was sixteen. Two years nearly.”


“But you started young too.” She was quite astute but everyone knew who Tony Stark was.

“At least your father appreciates what you do,” replied Tony. Though he’d come to some sort of understanding about his father after his trip to the past, the wounds were still there. “Mine wasn’t that supportive…”

“All families are different. Some try to help you teach your potential, others stymie you, and some try to take what is yours for their own.” Shuri placed the gauntlets back in their respective places.

Over dinner the previous night, King T’Chaka had revealed they’d had some trouble from an outsider a few weeks ago: a man who went by the name of Erik Killmonger. He had challenged T’Chaka for the throne as he had a legitimate claim to it through his father. T’Challa had fought in his father’s place and had narrowly won. Killmonger, despite conceding defeat, had tried to kill T’Challa forcing the Prince to kill him. Shuri’s comments were in relation to recent events.

“They are…” murmured Tony. “Shuri, I have a prospective project I’d like your assistance on, if you’d be willing to work collaboratively with me?” He was impressed with what he had seen so far and he remembered Rhodey telling him that Shuri had been trying to remove the Mind Stone from Vision before Thanos had arrived. She had nearly succeeded. All she’d need was more time, which Tony could give her.

“It depends on what it is, Mr. Stark if it is worth my time and effort…” she slyly said.

Oh, Tony liked her. She was witty. And she liked challenges.

Tony grinned. “Have you ever heard of the Vision?”

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**State of New York**

The meeting with the agents was soon over. Bucky had agreed to provide more information on the other Winter Soldiers providing it would be the end of the session afterward, which the two agents agreed with.

Steve was now with Bucky in his room whilst Natasha spoke to Charlotte and Simon.
“I think we have more than enough information to getting on with for now,” said Charlotte. “The existence of other Winter Soldiers is terrifying. If anyone knows where they are they could be unleashed upon the world.”

Natasha pursed her lips. “They won’t be. We’ll retrieve them before anyone else can use them. He gave us the location. We could have a team assembled in a few hours and bring them all in, help them as you are with Bucky.”

Simon shook his head. “It’s not that simple. We have to report to our superiors first. Then we’ll make a recommendation to bring the Avengers in.”

She didn’t mind the delay. Zemo had already been caught. There wasn’t any danger in the Winter Soldiers being released and Tony had prepared for everything. He’d already set a watch upon the Siberia base. They’d know if someone was heading in that direction and they’d be able to intercept them before the Soldiers could be released. Plus they had to check with Siberia if they were happy for the Avengers to work on their soil to retrieve potentially dangerous Super Soldiers.

“Fair point,” she admitted. “Let me know what the decision is. I can call Tony back from Wakanda if need be.”

“I think any action will not be taken for a few days,” explained Charlotte. “But we will be in touch.” She held out her hand for Natasha to shake. “Thank you for sitting in today. We look forward to seeing you next time.”

“My pleasure.”

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“I have heard of the Vision. An android of sorts?” Shuri enquired.

“He’s an android,” clarified Tony, “who has a synthetic body made of Vibranium. He has an object in his forehead which is an off-world artefact. It is a potentially dangerous artefact which could have terrible repercussions if used by the wrong person. Thor deemed it safe with Vision but I’d rather not take the risk.”

“And you’d like me to try to extract it without harming Vision?” Shuri guessed.

Tony nodded. “It could be tricky, a challenge even. Will you help?” He needed her on his side. She was the only one capable of extracting the stone safely and keeping Vision as he essentially was.

A bright smile crossed the young Princess’s face. “Of course. It would be a pleasure to work with you on this, Mr. Stark.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

I wanted Tony and Pepper to have time together and I think taking them both to Wakanda was a sensible move as both have potential business relationships in the offering there.
Regarding Wakanda's location in Africa. I used the MCU wiki to see if there was any information and it suggested it borders Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia, even though the natural beauty of the country with the vegetation doesn't seem to fit with the other countries surrounding it, but let's just say there are other reasons for Wakanda's natural beauty (I'm thinking of the plant that gives T'Challa his powers is the reason why Wakanda is so lush. The Black Panther has yet to be revealed but Tony does know T'Challa holds that mantle. He has yet to encounter a reason to be deployed as the Black Panther.

The film Black Panther did still happen in this fic, only slightly differently because T'Chaka wasn't killed, so I chose to have it happen offscreen in this fic. It isn't something that should involve Tony and Nat anyway and it makes sense that Killmonger was gearing up to try to take the throne anyway, whoever sat on it. I figured due to T'Chaka's age, T'Challa would be the one who would fight in his place. So, Killmonger came to challenge T'Chaka, he and T'Challa fought and ultimately, Killmonger's own actions caused T'Challa to kill him. The big difference is T'Challa is still a prince and not yet King.

Shuri and Tony should have met in the MCU. We were robbed of their interaction in the MCU and I had a lot of fun writing the scene between the two of them. You'll see more of the two together as they work on removing the Mind Stone from Vision.

And, yes, Bucky has revealed he isn't the only Winter Soldier. The other Soldiers will be dealt with in the next chapter as the Avengers team up.

Coming next: The Avengers travel to Siberia to encounter the other Winter Soldiers and Natasha takes a detour to Nick Fury to convince him to summon Carol Danvers back to Earth...

To be posted next Sunday...

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirteen: Siberia

Chapter Summary

The Avengers seek out the other Winter Soldier in Siberia...

Chapter Notes

First, thank you for the comments so far!

Secondly, this chapter doesn't cover what I had hoped it would. A few things have been pushed back to Chapter 14, 15 and 16. Apologies to everyone who had been anticipating Carol Danvers arrival. That will not be happening until at least Chapter 16 at the earliest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Siberia

Wakanda Air Space

Friday 29th July 2016

“I’d say this was quite a successful trip,” Pepper leaned back in the passenger seat situated to the side of Tony’s pilot chair in the QuinJet as he lifted them off from Wakanda. Their weeklong trip was over and they both felt satisfied with how it went and what the results were.

Tony leaned back, switching the controls to autopilot. “It was. I think we’ve both achieved our goals in coming here.”

“I wasn’t expecting them to offer a trade deal with Stark Industries though,” mused Pepper. “But I think they are intrigued by combining their technology with yours. It is the most sensible way for them to come out into the world by integrating themselves with us and slowly marketing their products. Our research and development division could learn a lot from them.”

“What better way to step out into the world by partnering with us?” grinned Tony. “No… King T’Chaka has made a wise choice. I could have told him about the threat from up there.” He pointed to the sky, meaning Thanos. “But I felt worrying them now would be folly. We need to build trust before I even tell them anything about what is coming.”

Pepper frowned. “You never told me what is coming. What you fought before… what killed you.”

Tony paused, his shoulders slumping. He’d been afraid of Pepper asking this, of wanting to know more about the threat he and Natasha were seeking to stop. He wrestled with the idea of telling her, of giving her more to worry about, but if Pepper was going to fight beside them, she needed to
know, even if Thanos wasn’t going to appear on their radar for another two years.

“I know you want to protect me, Tony, but I’m here to help. Whatever is coming, I need to know so I can be prepared to face it when it arrives,” reasoned Pepper quietly, mirroring Tony’s own thoughts.

“I know…” murmured Tony. He lifted his chin and looked straight at her. “His name is Thanos. He sent the army to New York… The one I threw a nuke at… In his own eyes, he wants to save the universe… but in doing so, he wants to end half of all life.”

Pepper’s eyes rose, her hair falling about her shoulders.

“He’s a madman. There are these six stones scattered across the universe which he needs to complete his plan. Two of them are on Earth.”

“That’s coincidence…” mentioned Pepper, “for two of the six to be here.”

“I know. The yellow stone in Vision’s head? That is one of them. Thanos killed him to get it. Shuri has agreed to help me with a project to remove it safely so Vision doesn’t have to die. Wanda gained her powers from experiments on the Mind Stone. She has the power to destroy it. The other stone is with a man called Stephen Strange. Gaining access to him will be difficult. Nat and I have decided to focus on the others first. Hopefully, by the time Thanos arrives, we will have obtained most if not all of the stones and destroyed them, thereby preventing Thanos from completing his plan. But therein lays the problem.”

Pepper could guess. “If he finds out the stones have been destroyed he’ll attack Earth in revenge.”

Tony nodded. “He will. Either way, Nat and I will still have to face him.”

Pepper laid a hand gently on Tony’s shoulder. “You won’t be alone. I’ll be there too.”

Tony smiled sadly. He didn’t want Pepper anywhere near Thanos but she’d faced him before and held her own. She could do it again, only this time with a lot more preparation.

“When do you plan to remove the stone from Vision?”

“As soon as possible. I need to talk to Vision and Wanda. They deserve to know and make a choice if they want to do it. Shuri is brilliant but there are always risks to every experiment. The quicker we destroy one of the stones, the happier I’ll feel knowing we are one step closer to stopping him for good.”

“But if you destroy one of them, haven’t you won already?”

“I’d rather not take the risk,” explained Tony quietly. “Those stones are too powerful to be left out in the universe. If they’re gone no one will be able to find them and use them against others again, will they? It’s better to remove the threat then leave a small semblance of it behind.” They had considered destroying just one stone but wasn’t it better to take them all out of the equation completely? “The next few years are going to be tough. We’ve got to find the rest before Thanos realises what we’re doing. We had allies from the stars before. Nat is going to try to bring one of them in soon. She’s very powerful. I think you’ll like her. We’ll need them if we’re going to retrieve the other stones.”

There was one stone Tony was concerned about acquiring. And that was the Tesseract, the one which contained the space stone. It was currently held on Asgard but they had no way of contacting Thor or reaching the place itself. There was a very high chance if Thanos was going to
retrieve at least one stone, it would be that one unless they could do something to gain Thor’s attention.

Currently, he didn’t have any ideas.

For now, the space stone could wait.

Pepper whispered quietly breaking the silence that had fallen between them. “That’s what killed you, wasn’t it? You used the stones, didn’t you?”

Tony swallowed the lump in his throat before he answered. “I did.”

Pepper stood from her chair and walked over to Tony, kneeling down and taking his hands in hers. “Promise me you won’t use them.”

Tony’s lips twitched. He sighed. “I can’t promise that. If it comes to it and there is no other option... I’ll have to, Pep, and I do not want to leave you again but it is a risk we both will have to take. I’m sorry I can’t promise you this... I didn’t intend to do it last time. It was either do something incredibly stupid and heroic and sacrifice myself or let everyone in the entire universe die.”

Pepper squeezed his hands gently. “I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sorry.”

“You do not need to apologise, Pep,” swallowed Tony quietly, his right hand gently stroking her cheek. “I want to promise you I’ll come home, but I can’t. I’m grateful you want to be a part of this, no matter how dangerous it will be.”

Pepper leaned into his warm embrace as she pulled herself up beside him, comforting him. “I know you cannot promise me anything but I know you’ll make it back. I believe you will.”

But Tony couldn’t be so sure himself.

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**Monday 1st August 2016**

**Siberia**

It had taken a few days to receive authorisation from the Accords committee and Siberia for the Avengers to act on the information regarding the other Winter Soldiers. The team was assembled, all of them being called in for the assignment, even Clint who had semi-retired from the Avengers so he could spend more time with his family.

Natasha had spoken to the Accords committee about bringing Bucky with them on the mission as he had known the other Winter Soldiers. He had already explained to them that they were not forced into this new life as Bucky had been; rather they had volunteered to subject themselves to it.

It was necessary to have Bucky’s expertise on this mission as he was the only one who would be able to accurately advise them on what to do if the other Soldiers were active at the base. He didn’t think they would be, yet it wasn’t a risk they were prepared to take.

Tony had also decided to bring Peter Parker with him. After having an intense discussion with May Parker, she had agreed on Peter accompanying Tony on the mission. It wasn’t supposed to be a dangerous one, more a routine mission that had the benefit of multiple planning, designed to keep everyone safe. Peter needed experience and Tony wanted to give his protégée a chance to
demonstrate what he could do.

They arrived in Siberia in the late hours of the day, landing just outside the HYDRA Siberian Facility.

Bucky went first, followed by Tony in his Iron Man suit and Natasha just behind him with the other Avengers bringing up the rear.

The entrance to the base was hidden behind a rock mound, cleverly hidden from view and not easily noticed.

Pausing at the door, Bucky turned back to the others. “It could be dangerous.”

“I think there is enough of us here,” said Steve quietly. “Do you fear they could be loose? Already out within the base?”

Bucky shook his head. “No. But they were unhinged. They were used sparingly I think. I don’t know if they did use them as I was always kept frozen until I was required. But I was… always their first port of call for most missions but when they really needed to utilise their skills they used them I believe. They were insane… They turned on their handlers and were frozen, to be kept under at all times unless they really needed to be called upon. When HYDRA abandoned the base they left them here, frozen in their cryo chambers. If I didn’t know about them they could be frozen for years, centuries even.”

“That wouldn’t be good,” said Sam.

“We’ve got a strategy,” interjected Tony. “I reckon they’ll still be frozen. If they are, we unfreeze them one at a time and try to talk them down. Perhaps freedom and away from HYDRA will help them?” He glanced to Bucky for confirmation. That was the plan. Try to bring the other soldiers in. If not, they’d either have to kill or keep the others frozen until a decision was made by the Accords Committee. Which was why they would only unfreeze one at a time, in the hope all of them could be talked down.

Bucky frowned. “They were all willing volunteers, from an elite HYDRA death squad. None of them were forced into it like I was. The serum they used from your father was supposed to be used in conjunction with Vita Radiation, the process Steve went under. But they injected them with it. The process and the following days and months of training turned them insane. They may not be reasonable. They turned on HYDRA.”

“Which could be a good thing,” advised Natasha carefully. “HYDRA promised them great things with their abilities they gifted them. And they were betrayed.”

Bucky didn’t look so sure. “It’s possible…”

“Seems like my father didn’t get the serum right after all…” mused Tony.

“I think it would have worked if they’d have access to Vita Radiation. It seemed the process they went through… having it injected intravenously was a mistake… They were awake for the whole procedure. In a lot of pain…” Bucky explained. They all knew this. “But if there is a way to save them…”

“Either way we have to know what they’re capable of,” added Wanda.

Tony nodded. They’d all agreed on trying to bring the soldiers in was the best solution but whether it was possible or not was another matter entirely. “Let’s go in… See where this leads us.”
Natasha eased into the dark corridor following Bucky. She kept her gun ready. She wasn’t wearing the suit Tony had crafted for her, instead choosing to use her usual suit, full of all her gadgets. She didn’t really need his suit since every Avenger was here. She glanced back. Tony was following behind her, his suit on but his helmet had yet to form around his face. It could be there in an instant if he needed it to be. “It’s very eerie… Dark and damp too.” She shivered slightly in the cold.

They proceeded down the corridor mostly in pairs. Tony had Peter walking beside him. Everyone had been introduced to Peter, they knew his identity and had agreed to keep it quiet. If Peter worked well with the team then he would be offered a place when he was older.

Bucky brought them to a large chamber, interspersed with equipment and off to the sides of the room wee cryo tubes, with five people sitting, cryogenically frozen inside.

Nat let out a breath. “At least they’re still asleep.” She’d worried about them changing events that someone may have freed them. Thankfully they were still out of the world.

“Who gets unfrozen first?” asked Sam, his gaze moving around the room, glancing at each Winter Soldier.

Bucky pointed to the closest chamber. “This one. Josef. He’s their leader. Unfreeze him first. He’ll be the most dangerous but if we can convince him to stand down, the others will too.”

“We should get into our positions,” advised Steve. “We all know what to do.”

Each Avenger made their way to different levels of the chamber, sitting atop various pieces of machinery.

Peter was with Sam, located up higher in the ceiling on top of an electronic cupboard linking all the cryo chambers together. Opposite them floated Vision and Wanda crouched on another piece of equipment, her hands poised to use her powers if need be. Clint was further down, with his bow and arrows out.

Stationed on the floor below, remaining in front of the chambers were Nat, Tony, Steve, and Rhodey, with Bucky standing off to the side.

Tony moved across the room to the central control panel, running his eyes over it.

“We can unfreeze one, right?” asked Natasha.

Tony nodded. “Yeah. It’s just figuring out the right sequence of keys to only bring Josef out. I’d rather not have to deal with all five at once.” He glanced over at Bucky. “I don’t suppose you…?”

Bucky shook his head. “No. I was always on the receiving end of it. If I was awake when the others were I was never shown how to bring them out of cryostasis. I suspect they thought I might rebel if I knew.”

Tony frowned. “Might be tricky then… Give me a few moments and I might have worked out the correct sequence.”

Natasha approached Bucky. “How volatile could this Josef be?” She eyed the man in the cryostasis chamber.

“Quite volatile,” the other admitted quietly. “He was the best after me… I mean, he did overpower
me once in training… He could be better than me. More of a struggle to apprehend.”

It wasn’t encouraging. They didn’t need any more trouble. She hoped this would be a simple mission, one that proved the whole team could work well together. They needed to work well together if she and Tony were going to succeed in stopping the inevitable that was to come.

“But if we are able to talk him down…” Bucky implied.

“He’ll be a valuable asset,” finished Steve. He glanced over at Tony by the console. “Any progress?”

Tony grinned. “I think I have the right sequence.” He scratched the back of his head. “The only problem is I will only if I give it a shot and there is a chance I could have miscalculated.”

“I don’t believe that, Stark,” quipped Natasha. She knew Tony well enough he rarely made mistakes in his calculations. “Go for it. We have enough people here to subdue all of them if they all do break free,” She hoped. It wasn’t a given but it was possible.

Tony input the sequence, flipped a few switches and turned two large buttons before stepping back with the others and watched Josef’s pod. Noises erupted from the pod, steam issued, heat passing into the chamber to defrost him. The frost across his skin started to melt and warmth began to show on the skin as the process sped up.

“The door unlocks with a separate command,” explained Bucky.

“You couldn’t have said that before?” asked Tony, raising an eyebrow.

The man in the chair began to stir, his fingers moving slightly and his head twisting from side to side slightly as consciousness began to come back to him. Minutes passed and he opened his eyes, seeing the Avengers in front of him. His hands formed into fists.

Natasha’s stomach dropped.

The man’s eyes found Bucky as he moved into his vision.

“At ease, Josef,” said Bucky quietly. “HYDRA is gone. We’re not here to hurt you.”

“You…” the man said.

“We want to help you,” continued Bucky. “We can free you, help you. You have no need to serve HYDRA again.”

“I can do what I want…” said Josef. And he moved, leaping from his chair to bash his fists against the glass. The glass didn’t crack.

“Hey, there are a lot of us here! If you think you can take us all…” began Tony, but he leaped back slightly as cracks appeared in the glass as Josef punched again.

“Don’t you want to live a normal life?” asked Steve, stepping forward. “Away from HYDRA’s rules?”

Josef laughed. “HYDRA gave me what I wanted! Strength and power to do what I want!” His fist caused more cracks. “I could kill you all easily.”

Natasha swallowed, stepping back a bit towards Tony. “He’s insane… We won’t be able to reason with him.”
“No,” agreed Tony. “I might be able to freeze him again before he gets –”

The glass smashed and Josef leaped out, landing on his feet, his eyes shining and his smile wide in insanity.

“Shit!” Tony’s helmet formed around his face and he raised his arm, ready for a repulsor blast.

Natasha ducked around behind him, tucking her gun back into its holster and removing her batons. If this was going to be a fight, she’d rather be more of an adversary with the batons than with her gun.

Bucky raised his hands, stepping in front of Josef. “Listen! What HYDRA did to you went wrong. We can fix that!”

“I don’t need to be fixed!” roared Josef before he lunged at Bucky, hitting out and attempting to punch his adversary. “I’ve beaten you before and I can beat you again!”

The two struggled, brawling one another as Bucky tried to twist Josef’s arms but he flipped himself over, bringing Bucky with him.

Natasha winced. She edged forward but Tony held her back. “Why?” she demanded.

“He’s interested in Bucky. We can subdue him if we do not interfere,” whispered Tony quietly.

Natasha threw him a surprised look. “How?”

“Wanda.” Tony glanced up at where she was positioned high above him. “You weren’t there… but in the battle where I died… She nearly destroyed Thanos…”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “But she hasn’t used her powers for anything like that before…”

“No,” admitted Tony, “but she’s always been capable of it. Her anger over Vision fuelled it. But if she’s capable of that much power when angry, just think of how much potential she has when she is in full control of her powers.”

Bucky scrambled to his feet, with Josef following, trying to wrench him back down. He’d already signalled to Steve to back down, to not aid him. They had to try it this way first. If Bucky couldn’t take him down then the others would move in.

Natasha patched into her communicator. “Wanda, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear.”

Glancing up, she saw Wanda looking down at her.

“Tony has an idea. Are you up for it?”

“What’s his idea?” asked Wanda through the earpiece.

Natasha focused upon Bucky’s fight with Josef. “Can you use your powers to hold Josef still, long enough for us to sedate him? It might be the safest way to bring them all in.”

Wanda fell silent. “I don’t think I can…”

She hadn’t discovered her full potential yet. She didn’t believe she was capable.
Tony activated his own ear-piece. “Wanda, I know you can do this. It’s a matter of trying.”

“I’ll try…” she answered.

As Bucky ducked again, trying to avoid Josef’s ruthless attacks, red lines appeared around his attacker, lifting him up in the air, holding him, though he still struggled.

“LET ME GO!”

Bucky moved back, rubbing the blood from his nose.

“Quickly, sedate him!” shouted Steve, even as he moved beneath the Super-Soldier as Wanda kept him lifted high in the air.

“NO! I WILL NOT-“ Josef was struggling in Wanda’s grip, attempting to pull himself free. He wouldn’t be able to but he could struggle. Sedating him would be difficult.

“Stark! Wanda’s looking a little green!” Clint’s voice came over the comm. “I don’t think she’ll be able to hold it!”

Tony shot up towards Wanda’s location, landing precariously next to her. She was straining, her body shaking as she sought to control the power coming from her. Sweat beaded down her forehead, dripping onto her cheeks. Vision was looking concerned for her wellbeing. “Hey, Wanda, concentrate, breathe slowly… Don’t strain yourself.”

Wanda’s shoulders shook. “I… can’t!” Her breathing was becoming quicker, the strain becoming too much for her.

“Someone get him sedated now!” yelled Tony. He held Wanda’s shoulders, trying to keep her calm, attempting to help her maintain control.

“I’ll do it, Mr. Stark!” Peter webbed a bit to the ceiling and then jumped down, landing next to Steve, who passed him the sedation injector. Then he shot another web to the left, circling himself round to the struggling Josef, still in Wanda’s grip.

He had more control now, was able to move his legs and kicked out as Peter approached, narrowly missing him.

Tony winced, wishing it had been someone else to try but this mission was all about determining how useful they could all be to the team, and how they could work together. This was just one small part.

Peter managed to land on the man’s shoulders who immediately tipped his head back in a desperate attempt to dislodge the teenager from his shoulders. But Peter hung on, holding onto the injector.

Steve ran up and jumped, grabbing onto Josef’s kicking legs, managing to get them in an arm lock, stopping his frantic movements.

“Hurry, kid!” shouted Steve.

Peter pressed the injector into the base of the man’s neck, depressed the trigger, watching as the solution flowed into the vein.

The man’s struggles ceased and he fell limp in their grip, the serum affecting him immediately.

The body fell to the floor as Wanda lost her grip and Steve and Peter hit the floor hard as Josef’s
limp body crashed down beside them.

“Are you alright?” Natasha ran up, helping Peter sit up.

“Yeah… Sorry…”

“You did fine,” she smiled. “You got him out. That was the main thing.” She glanced up at Tony. “Is Wanda okay?”


Steve frowned, moving over to Bucky and checking if he was hurt. “You pushed her too hard, Tony.”

“She needs to practice because she has potential that would benefit the Avengers to a large degree, if she knows how to use her powers safely without harming herself,” added Tony. “I’ll get her out of here. Back to the QuinJet.”

“Please do, Tony,” confirmed Natasha. She focused on Steve. They watched as Tony carried Wanda’s unconscious form out of the chamber. “One down, four to go.”

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The other four Winter Soldiers were easier to handle now they had taken Josef out of the equation. In case he woke up they kept him heavily bound to ensure he could be transported easily. The other four soldiers were not as volatile as Josef when they woke from their slumber, however, once they realised they were surrounded they did attempt to fight.

However, with each one the Avengers used different strategies, working together to ensure they achieved their goal. Vision was able to easily overpower one on his own, whilst Clint shot arrows at one of the soldiers, working with Natasha so she could easily inject them on the sly. Sam ran a distraction for Steve taking down a third and Bucky and Rhodey teamed together to sedate the last Soldier.

Once they had caught all of the Soldiers, they transported them back to the QuinJet, ensuring they would still be sedated for the journey back. Due to the amount of Avengers they’d brought on the mission, they’d used three QuinJets, enabling one Jet to be used to transport the prisoners back. Steve had volunteered to pilot that one with Bucky and Sam and Vision assisting him if they caused any trouble.

Tony was sitting with Wanda when Natasha found them in the QuinJet.

“Is she okay?” She glanced at the sleeping form of the young woman.

Tony nodded. “Yeah. She is. Just has a very severe headache.” He fiddled with his fingers. “I feel bad about it. I didn’t believe she would have a reaction like that…”

“I guess if you’ve never really tapped into your full powers before…” Natasha began. “She needs to train more. She struggles to control them.”

“Unchecked they could be dangerous,” noted Tony quietly, checking the IV line he’d inserted into Wanda to keep her hydrated. “Kinda odd how you can control yours easily though.”

Natasha shrugged. “I think there is more to both of us than we know, Tony.”
Tony shook his head, laughing quietly. “I don’t have powers. There is no reason for me to have them. I’m fine with the armour.”

“An armour that couldn’t protect you in the end,” she pointed out.

“Point,” he admitted. He didn’t want powers. He didn’t need them. “I think if I had an ounce of powers they would have surfaced by now. We’ve been in enough dangerous situations to warrant them and only you have shown an affinity for them.”

Natasha sat down next to Tony. “Whatever happens, will happen. We got all the Soldiers. Steve, Bucky, Sam, and Vision are escorting them back. Clint, Rhodey and your kid-” she grinned.

“He’s not my kid.” Tony pushed back.

“-are in the other QuinJet. Clint will drop Peter off and go home and Rhodey will bring the Jet back. You okay if I fly us back?”

Tony nodded. “Sure. I think I need to be here when Wanda wakes up. I did, technically, do this to her after all.”

“She’ll be fine, Tony.” Natasha rubbed his shoulders. “We are one step closer now we’ve sorted the other Soldiers out. They’re out of our jurisdiction now. Bit by bit, we’re getting there.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Josef is the name of one of the Winter Soldiers - the others do not have any official names.

Wanda and her powers. Her power-levels throughout the MCU seems to change frequently. The powers she had in Endgame were just, quite insane, compared to how she used her powers in Age of Ultron and Civil War, so I think potentially, during the two years Team Cap were on the run, Wanda was setting out and improving her powers. I thought it might be interesting to explore the possibility of her overstretching herself because she hasn't unleashed her full potential before. Her holding Josef could potentially tire her out, especially if he continually struggles.

I wanted to show the Avengers working together and get Peter in on the action too. I think this was a good chapter to demonstrate them relying upon and helping one another out. And I hope it worked.


Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Fourteen: A Growing Friendship

Chapter Summary

Tony and Wanda and Nat and Fury....

Chapter Notes

Hello all,

This chapter was quite difficult to write. Struggled with it a bit. The Tony/Pepper scene has been moved to the next chapter as the cliff-hanger sort-of type ending just seemed appropriate.

I have had a few comments suggesting Tony is out-of-character. I can understand that, as he may not be his usual self, he does seem more serious. He's been through a lot and he's trying to stop Thanos before he can snap his fingers again and he is really focused on that mission. I have taken this feedback on board and I hope future chapters will showcase a less serious Tony.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Growing Friendship

Tuesday 2nd August 2016

New Avengers Facility

Wanda slept, her chest rising up and down in tandem with her breathing. The colour was seeping back into her cheeks. There was an IV line inserted into one of her veins in her hand, keeping her hydrated. She was exhausted. She’d hardly stirred in the flight back to the Compound.

Tony sat at her side, his guilt warring inside him for what he had asked her to do. Even though she had shown extraordinary powers during the Battle of Earth, this younger Wanda wasn’t at the point yet where she could tap into her full potential. She’d learned a lot about them during the two years she had been on the run and her secret liaisons with Vision.

He glanced down at the data-pad in his hand. He couldn’t just sit here and do nothing. He had to be doing something. So he’d decided to start work on designing further improvements to his Iron Man suit. They were coming closer towards the inevitability of facing Thanos and Tony needed to be ready. He didn’t want to be caught short-handed. He’d also work on gear for the rest of the team.

He was so absorbed by his designing that he failed to realise Wanda was slowly waking up and jumped slightly when she spoke quietly.
“Stark?” mumbled Wanda.

Tony peered over his glasses. “Oh, I didn’t see you were awake there.”

“Only a few minutes…” Wanda scrunched her face up in pain. “What… happened?”

Tony leaned forward. “Still got a headache?”

Wanda nodded in reply. “Not as bad as it was…” She trailed off. “Why… are you here?”

Tony swallowed. He knew why she was asking. They rarely spent time together. He’d always tried to avoid her as much as he could. He’d always been afraid she would use her powers on him again, force him to do things he had never wanted to do. They hadn’t talked about how she had blamed him for her parent’s death. He wondered if the Wanda he had known had only tolerated him so she could remain an Avenger? He would never know the answer to that question. The time he had come from was gone. The others hadn’t lived the same experiences he’d had. Only one person could truly relate to him and that was Natasha. He’d be lost without her though he suspected he would have figured everything out on his own anyway.

Wanda’s face grew confused as Tony failed to answer her simple question.

“I’m here because what happened to you was my fault.” It was the simplest answer possible. “I asked too much of you. And you exhausted yourself because of it. And I’m sorry about that.” He needed to apologise to her. There was no way to escape the reality of him not having caused her undue harm.

Gently Wanda eased herself up in the bed, pushing herself up with her hands.

“Are you sure?” Tony asked, aware of how horrible Wanda must still be feeling.

“I’m fine, Stark,” she grated out. “Sleeping more will not do me any good.”

“Do you want some water?” he offered her a cup and she took it, sipping it slowly, her eyes focused on his face.

“There’s something… different about you.” Wanda scrutinized him carefully. “But I cannot put my finger on it.”

“How do you know there is something different about me?” asked Tony quietly, leaning back in his chair.

Wanda cocked her head to the side. “I don’t know. You just… feel… different.”

“Feel different?” He was curious by her choice of words. “Are you reading my mind?”

“No! I would never do that! It’s…” Wanda bit her lower lip. “It’s not just you. I have noticed someone else who is different…”

Shit…

Tony tried not to react but he knew his eyebrows had raised. “I’m not sure what you mean.” He tried to deflect but Wanda could be very perceptive when she wanted to be.

“You quit the Avengers. But now you are back. You just appeared during a planning session for Lagos which you shouldn’t have known about. And then the Accords happened. You helped us understand them, allowed us to make our own decisions. And then there are you and Natasha. You
were never really close and now you spend a lot of time together.” Wanda looked down at her hands. “I don’t think the others have noticed… But there is something else about you that I can sense, about both of you.”

Tony’s mouth had suddenly gone dry. “I’m sure it is nothing,” he deflected.

“I don’t believe I’m wrong.” Wanda leaned forward. “There is something within you both. I can feel it when I get close to you. Natasha has it but it is less pronounced than you. It feels like…” She searched for the correct words. “Untapped potential. I feel my powers resonating with you and Nat and they have never done so before. Not until recently. Something is going on between you two. I can sense it.”

“I’m not sure what to say,” replied Tony. Others were not supposed to find out. But Wanda had received powers from an Infinity Stone… He grimaced. “I was kinda wondering when someone would realise Nat and I have been spending an unusual amount of time together.”

“I’m guessing you cannot tell me why?” enquired Wanda.

Tony shook his head.

“And that I am capable of so much more with my powers?” Wanda raised the question. “I’ve barely begun to use them. And yet you ask me to do something I’ve never really achieved before. Holding that man still for so long strained me, Stark. I was losing control. He was slipping out of my grasp.”

Tony grimaced. He had asked too much of her. She’d lost control before, though he had prevented it from happening now by tagging along on the Lagos mission. Wanda had not had the need to contain a bomb. That had caused her a large amount of strain, enough that she had been unable to fully control the trajectory of the bomb which had caused the deaths of hundreds of people. But she was capable of it, capable of controlling her power and using it in large quantities without tiring herself out. She was just learning to control them now so it was natural for her to exhaust herself.

“How could you know I was capable of something like that?” she asked, keeping her gaze directed at Tony.

He sighed. “Wanda… There are things happening I cannot tell you about. Not yet. I’m trying to keep us together. Something is… coming. I don’t know when but it is on its way. Whatever you sense in me… whatever it is…”

“It’s power,” she repeated. “But it’s trapped inside you… Like… you are unable to access it…”

Tony wanted to leave, to walk out. He didn’t want to believe her, believe he had any ounce of powers but if Wanda could sense them there… He shook his head. Even Natasha was convinced he had something.

“You’re powerful, Stark.”

“Wanda…” he started. He searched for the right words. “I think you’re reading me wrong. I am nothing special at all. I am an arrogant, sarcastic, former playboy, philanthropist, billionaire who only works for himself. Someone like me would never have powers.”

Her face twitched. “You do not work for yourself, Stark.”

Tony folded his arms across his chest. “I used to. All I cared about was myself and doing what I wanted.”
“I once thought that too,” she replied quietly. “I misjudged you. But I wonder who you really are, Stark. Are you still the same person I manipulated into creating something which would seek to destroy you? I forced you to relieve your fears because I wanted to see you self-destruct… But, I think you already have. You’re holding it together by… strands… I can’t explain it. You and Natasha are the same. You’re different from the rest of us. You know more than you should. I just can’t place you.”

Tony sighed. He didn’t know what to do. Wanda clearly knew something was different about them. “I can’t say. If you say I’m powerful, Wanda, so are you. You have powers, working powers, something I do not have. You’ve taught yourself to control them. Your abilities have the potential to be endless!” He stood from his chair, not wanting to stay sitting if this conversation was going to continue.

“But you cannot tell me why!” replied Wanda. “I’m still getting to know what I can do!”

“Look, I pushed you too hard, alright? I shouldn’t have asked too much of you. I’m sorry, I really am, but I don’t know what you mean when you claim I am different!”

Wanda’s lips twitched. “You’re much too focused.”

That caught Tony and he stepped back. “Too focused?”

“On stopping whatever is coming. You and Natasha. Both of you are different. Maybe I’m sensing power in you two because of that…” She shook her head. “No… Whatever it is, it is not because you are too focused.” Wanda sighed. “I should stop pushing you. You’re not going to tell me anything, are you?”

“No. I’m not.”

“I could tell Steve,” she pointed out.

“Is that a threat, Miss Maximoff?” asked Tony. Steve could not know.

“No. I wouldn’t do it. Maybe last year I would have done but not now. I think you’re just as confused as I am about this. I won’t say anything to anyone about how different you two feel to me, or the sparks of power I sense.”

“Why would you protect me when I am trying to keep something from the team? You have no reason to do so. You hate me.”

“Whatever it is, it’s important, otherwise you and Nat wouldn’t be working so closely together.” She flinched at Tony’s words. “I don’t hate you.”

“I killed your parents,” stated Tony. “You blame me for their deaths. And rightly too.”

“I don’t blame you for their deaths anymore,” explained Wanda, shifting her legs over the side of the bed. “Your weapons were dealt under the table. It was those that killed my parents. You didn’t know what was happening.”

“Because I was irresponsible and didn’t care about others,” interjected Tony harshly. Afghanistan had opened his eyes, had shown a harsh reality he had never once considered. “Only about how much money I had and how quickly I could spend it. All I cared about was the next woman.” He didn’t like to dwell on his past. He was different now, a much better person because of it.

“Natasha explained to me how you were not at fault.”
That made Tony pause. "Nat did?"

"A while back. Just after the Lagos mission. She talked to me about it. Told me to investigate further. I did. You were cleared of being complicit in dealing under the table. You generally didn’t know."

"I should have paid more attention though," said Tony quietly. He still felt guilty that he had allowed such a misuse of his weapons. He never wanted his products misused again which was why he had stopped all weapons production, stepped away from the trade and moved into areas where he knew people could be protected. The only weapons he built now were ones he intended to use for himself or his teammates. "I should have realised something was up when I was profiting more than I should. I still reaped the benefits of what Stane did."

"But you became Iron Man and have fought for the people. You still do. I was young and naive. I allowed Hydra to manipulate me, allowed them to experiment on me just so I could destroy you. Pietro and I were the only ones who survived Strucker’s experiments. I think we survived because we were meant to use our powers to help others, not help ourselves. Doing what I did to you, causing you to create Ultron, it opened my eyes. The one good thing to come out of it was Vision. I was wrong but I’m trying to be better. That’s why I want to be an Avenger, so I can show the world what I’m capable of. These powers are just an extension of who I am.” Wanda stood up, stretching her legs and arms, her gaze watching Tony carefully.

Tony moved around the room, not wanting to stay still and continue the awkward conversation but he simply couldn’t walk away. He kept moving equipment around the room, a nervous tick he had developed over the years.

"Tony?"

Surprise flittered through him.

Wanda had never used his first name in any of their interactions before. He couldn’t help twisting his head to look at her. She was standing behind him, arms loosely at her sides in the medical gown she was wearing, her hair trailing down her shoulders. What surprised him most was her right hand held out in front of her, stretching towards him, as if she was expecting a handshake.

Curious he turned fully to face her. “I’m not sure if I shook your hand if it would be a shake or a squeeze,” he commented wirily.

The right side of Wanda’s lips moved upwards in amusement. “Just a handshake.”

“Why?” However, he did reach out and take her hand.

“Because,” she explained, “I want to start over. I want to put our pasts behind us. Move on. Begin a friendship, one that can grow and prosper.” She shook his hand. “If something is coming and I am capable of so much more with my powers? You’ll need me. Better for us to be friends, and learn to work together to face this, right?”

“Sure.” Tony smiled. He hadn’t expected this. It felt like it was the beginning of an unexpected friendship.

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Thursday 4th August 2016

“What brings you to my neck of the woods, Miss Romanoff?”
Nick Fury leaned back in his chair in the secluded cubicle of a diner, with one arm draped across the back of it, a slight grin decorating his features.

Natasha sat opposite him, leaning on the table, hands clasped together. “You have something I need.”

“Very formal to your old boss,” commented Fury.

Natasha shrugged. “I have my reasons. This isn’t a social call. I know you are off the grid and you’ve set this meeting up at my request… Nice deserted diner by the way.” It had always been one of his favourite places to set up secluded meetings within the general vicinity of the public eye. They’d done it with Stark back when he’d been suffering from Palladium poisoning.

“It’s a nice payoff for them. Morning off work.” He sipped from his coffee cup. “Let’s get to the point.”

Natasha had considered different ways to approach Fury on the subject of Carol Danvers. He had kept her secret for years. Her details didn’t even exist inside SHIELD’s database. She was still listed as dead in official records, having been killed in an Air Force mission, which had gone wrong. Natasha knew, from her discussions with Carol over the years after the Decimation, how she had obtained her powers and what had happened to her since her accident. She marvelled at the woman’s dedication to help the universe. But Fury had kept her existence off the records, leaving only him with the opportunity to contact her if he felt she was needed.

“I need to contact someone,” she began, keeping her game face on. “Someone only you have the capacity to do so.”

Fury sat up straighter, his posture moving from relaxed to on guard.

Her words had put him on edge.

“I think you know who I mean. Carol Danvers.” Natasha didn’t flinch when Fury pulled out his gun and pointed it at her. She had expected this.

“No one should know who she is or that she exists. Reveal yourself.” Fury said firmly.

“I’m from the future,” said Natasha quietly. She’d thought about this long and hard. The only way to convince him was to tell him the truth. Surprisingly the inner voice had agreed with her assessment of the limited options she had. They needed Carol Danvers and the only way she could possibly gain Fury’s help was if he was aware of the truth. “I’m still Natasha. But fighting to stop what happened. And we need Carol.”

Fury’s eyes didn’t shake or move from the glare he was giving her. The gun did not waver either, nor did he lower it. “Prove it.”

“I can’t. You weren’t part of the future I came from. You were already gone. We found the communicator device she gave you. You’d already called her. We kept triangulating the signal out into space. She came and she helped us. But the cost was high for me and for Tony. Both of us are fighting to stop what happened. And we need Carol.” She said this sincerely, hoping it might be enough to convince Fury to at least lower the gun.

He did and he slowly sat back down but he remained watchful of her.

She didn’t blame him.
“How can I believe you when you can offer no concrete proof?” Fury pointed out. He still had the gun in hand, resting on the table. He could easily shoot her if he wanted to.

“Would I really be telling you this if I was lying?” she pondered back, wanting him to think about why she could trust him with such sensitive information. “Only one other person knows, aside from Tony, is aware of where we truly come from. Tony could only convince them because he became partial to information later on in his life which he could use to prove he was from the future. Unfortunately, I do not have any such luxury. I am Natasha. I have been a SHIELD agent for years. Barton convinced you to give me a chance. I was once a target, destined to be hunted by your organisation, instead, you offered me a chance to change and I took it. I’ve never looked back since. Never regretted it, always been loyal to you.”

He was still scrutinising her. “If I believe you… what do you need her for?”

“We need to get in contact with a specific group of people. They are space’s equivalent of the Avengers. Sort of.” That was the best way to describe the Guardians of the Galaxy. “We lack the technology and the tech to reach out to them though I’m sure it is not out of Tony’s ability to do so. But we do not have time to wait for him to invent something to reach out to. Carol is our only chance of getting things moving. Something bad is coming: the same person who was behind the attack on New York.”

“Loki?” Fury queried.

Natasha shook her head. “No. It’s worse. His name is Thanos and he wants to destroy half the universe. Where we came from he succeeded. You were one of his victims. We want to stop it from happening. To beat him and revive everyone who lost their lives across the entire universe, both Tony and I died. We both gave our lives and we were sent back here to fix things.”

“You have been working together for a while. I may be out of the field but I am still within the loop. I did find it curious.” He raised the gun again. “But I still require more proof.”

“I can’t give you anything else.” She pressed forward. She had to get through to him. What could she say to convince him?

“You’ve said nothing that could prove to me you are from the future. You could be lying. You could be pretending to be Agent Romanoff, taken her form and her memories. Killing you would revert you to your true form.”

_He thinks you are a Skrull._

The voice was back. She didn’t even know what a Skrull was. She chose to ignore it.

“Killing you would prove you are one.”

Natasha swallowed, her fingers gripping the edge of the table.

_Tell him how he lost his eye._

Of course, why hadn’t she thought of it? Carol had once told her how Fury had really lost his eye. It had been on one of the few visits Carol had made to Earth following the Decimation. They’d been reminiscing over the people they had lost. She’d asked Carol how she and Nick Fury had met. Carol had told her.

“A Flerken scratched your eye. That’s how you really lost it. Not in an epic battle as you have claimed, but to a creature who looks like a cat.” Natasha crossed her arms over her chest and stared
at Fury. “That help at all? Carol told me. And she hasn’t been to Earth since she left.”
Fury lowered the gun again. “You’re making this difficult, Agent Romanoff.”

“How about me?”

“Only one other person on the planet knows the truth and you’ve never had any contact with them,” sighed Fury. “You’re either a Skrull or you really are Natasha Romanoff from the future who has met Carol Danvers.”

“How are you going to prove it is me without shooting me?”

“One simple way.” Fury smirked. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the communicator device that enabled him to call Carol Danvers. “Let’s see what she thinks of you, shall we?”

And he pressed the button.

To be continued....

Many thanks to JediPanda22 for their amazing front cover for this story, depicting Tony and Natasha! Please check out their other work on Instagram!
Please let me know what you think!

Tony and Wanda - definitely a friendship I never considered I would be writing about, but they've had a lot of issues in the MCU and Tony now has a chance to fix them. Wanda, having received her powers from an Infinity Stone, can sense there is a difference to Tony and Nat. Her words to Tony are important, especially when it comes to later developments in the story.

Nat and Fury - this was very difficult to write. They need to get Carol to Earth but their only option is through Fury. But what would make Fury believe Natasha is from the future? Though Carol wasn't there when Goose scratched his eye I think it is safe to say she would have known about how he really lost it. Fury calling Carol Danvers at the end is his way of checking to see if Nat is a Skrull or not.

Next chapter: Carol arrives, Tony and Peter bond, and Tony and Pepper have another moment.

To be posted next Sunday!

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Five: Carol

Chapter Summary

Carol arrives!

Chapter Notes

Finally, we reach Carol arriving in this story! Natasha experiments with her powers and Tony and Peter spend some time together...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Carol

Friday 5th August 2016

Carol Danvers didn’t arrive straight away. It had taken her a few days to reach Earth when the Avengers had found Fury’s communicator calling out to her. They’d kept sending out the signal, wanting to know who Fury had called before he had become a victim of the Snap. Much like this time when Fury called her, she didn’t arrive until a few days later.

Natasha had agreed to remain with Fury until he could be truly certain of her identity and that she wasn’t a Skrull. The fact she had known how he had lost his eye was a big point in her favour however Fury wanted to be sure she wasn’t a Skrull and Carol would be able to be certain. She’d been allowed to inform Tony who hadn’t been happy with leaving her with Fury; however, she had asked him to stay out of this as it meant they would be able to get Carol on their side if they agreed to Fury’s wishes. Suspicious in nature, Fury wanted to be sure before he could fully put his trust in Natasha. She’d been surprised he’d allowed her to contact Tony but it was a welcome one.

Natasha had remained in a small room, quite happy to wait to ally Fury’s fears. He’d find out the truth soon. At least they had given her access to a datapad which suggested Fury believed her but he wanted Danvers to have the final say. She’d have gotten bored rather quickly. Though Fury was technically retired he was still running what remained of SHIELD in the background, away from the public’s eye.

Sitting on her bunk with her legs crossed over, Natasha closed her eyes. Now was a good time as any to practice using her powers.

Show me Tony,

She knew she could sense him, that she could trace him through their connection. She wished she could understand more of it. She saw him in her mind’s eye. He was in his lab at the Avenger’s Facility with Peter Parker. They seemed to be designing something. She was seeing out of Tony’s eyes as she had before when he’d been imprisoned by Ross. This was an ability that could be
useful. It was a shame Tony was unable to reach out for her though he would know she was there as he had recognised her before.

*Tony, do you mind? I’m bored sitting in this room waiting for Danvers… Just wanted to explore what I can do…*

Still seeing out of Tony’s eyes, she felt him jerk a bit. He hadn’t noticed her there, so absorbed in his work he had been. She watched as he wrote ‘I don’t mind’ on a scrap of paper to his right.

*Thank you.* She hadn’t wanted to intrude upon his soul without permission. Of course, there would be times when she may need to do so but in this instance she wanted him to have the choice to allow her access to his soul.

She decided to delve deeper into his soul. She could feel him all around her, his emotions, his worry for the future, his intense desire to do things **right**. Images flickered up in front of her, of his life and she felt mortified she was partial to specific moments of his life. There was no order to them, random snippets jumping out of her.

And then she saw it: Tony engaging Thanos, tugging on the Infinity Gauntlet, desperately trying to wrestle the stones from him. She saw Thanos throw him away, proclaim proudly that he was inevitable only to snap his fingers and nothing was there. She saw his realisation that the stones had been stolen, turned his attention back to Tony who revealed them on his right hand, settling into place on a nano-built Gauntlet, set into his suit. She saw Tony say ‘I am Iron Man’ and snap his fingers before pain wrecked through his entire body and the energies of the Infinity Stones burned his body, destroying cells and causing organ failure.

She felt his body failing as he lay in the dirt…

*No!*

Natasha pulled back out of the memory, panting heavily, still connected to Tony’s soul. What she had witnessed had not affected him in real life. She’d travelled too deep into his soul. Glancing back at the cascade of memories she noticed a small glow from behind them.

*What is that?*

Natasha pushed onwards and felt an intense power rush over her as she flowed past the memories, and found herself in a darkened room, faced with a glowing ball of rippling energy which seemed to be set at the very centre of Tony’s soul. Entranced by it, she stepped forward, feeling drawn to it. She could feel her own body responding to it, vibrating to the energies that sat within Tony.

*What is this?*

It was power.

This was proof Tony had powers.

But what was odd about it was the ball of energy seemed bound, tied together, as if there was an invisible barrier there, preventing the energy from being unleashed.

Spiritually she reached out towards it…

Her fingers brushed against it and static electricity coursed up her arm in a variety of different colours. It was too quick for her to catch all of them but she’d at least recognised red and purple. She almost felt drawn to them. Her curiosity grew.
**But why can't he use them?** She stared at the ball of energy, marvelling in its beauty.

That was the most baffling part of this discovery. The knowledge he had the capacity for powers the same as her, yet she could use hers with no trouble but Tony… He couldn’t. He refused to believe…

**Oh… Is that the reason? Because he refuses to believe he has them?**

She phrased the question in her mind, hoping the inner voice would answer but it didn’t, slightly disappointing her. She wanted to push on further, exploring past the ball of energy but as she tried to move around it she struck a hard, invisible barrier.

**Ow!** Natasha wasn’t one to give up and she pushed herself forward again.

This time the invisible barrier glowed brightly as she tried to push against it.

And then she went flying backward as intense pain spread through her, pushing her further away. Yanked backward by an invisible force, Natasha felt herself being pulled back to the edge of Tony’s soul, being yanked out completely and back into her own body.

Her eyes opened and she was back in the small quarters she had been given. Shaking her head and allowing her red hair to fall down her shoulders, Natasha leaned back against the wall, her mind whirring with the information she had obtained during her search of Tony’s soul.

She had a lot to think about.

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A few hours later she was collected from her room by Fury who walked her towards the conference room. When they entered the room, she saw Carol Danvers standing there in ordinary clothes, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders but her eyes were hard and steely as she considered the woman in front of her.

“Hi.” Natasha stood in front of the other, watching as she was assessed by the steely gaze.

“I’ve never seen you before,” Carol stated.

Natasha shrugged. She knew Fury would have filled her in on what she’d said. “I’ve met you.”

“In this future, you come from?”

Natasha nodded. “I did. We were friends. You told me a lot about yourself as you grew to trust me over the years. I think we could do the same.”

Carol frowned. “You know about Fury’s eye. He vowed me to secrecy. And I know my best friend has had no contact with you either.” She strode forward until she was directly in front of Natasha. “So how do you know?”

“As I said,” repeated Natasha, “I got to know you. Fury was lost. You were an ally of ours.”

“It’s hard to tell if you are telling the truth.” Carol mused.

Fury walked around Natasha, hands in his pockets, relaxed. “I want to believe her. She wanted me to summon you. Would you have told her?”

Carol glanced at Fury. “It’s not a question one can answer. She’s a dilemma. I could have become
close to her... especially if we shared experiences with you.”

“‘She’ is right here!” Natasha frowned. “Tony and I have been trying to avoid telling people what happened to us. But we need to get out there.” She pointed upwards. “And Earth doesn’t have the technology to do it yet. Tony could probably create something but...”

“That would be too suspicious,” assumed Carol wisely. “Assuming you really are from the future, how can we know for sure you have Earth’s best interests at heart? How do we know you simply do not want to destroy the Earth?”

“I’m not a villain. I want to save it.” Natasha gritted her teeth. She’d always known convincing Fury would be hard but she hadn’t expected it to be this challenging. It was reassuring that Fury wanted to believe her. “Look, if you’re not going to believe me, just shoot me and get it over with. At least then you’ll be satisfied it really was me.”

“I’d have taken her blood,” noted Fury, “but Skrulls are capable of changing DNA and would be able to mimic the samples.” He stopped and turned to face Natasha. “The problem we have is how to rule out one hundred percent that you are not a Skrull without shooting you dead? I’d rather not kill one of my best agents. I called you in, Danvers, to see if you could help us with this.”

“Most Skrulls I know are not hostile,” replied Carol easily. “There are some fractions of the species that continue to remain hostile...”

Natasha was beginning to get fed up with this constant back and forth. “Can someone tell me what a Skrull really is?”

“Shapeshifters. They can take the form of anyone and mimic them in DNA. They also have the ability to maintain recent memories,” explained Carol.

“How far back in memories?” enquired Fury.

“Not too far. A few days, potentially weeks at most.”

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “Happy now? Would I know how I became an agent of SHIELD if Skrulls only have recent memories?”

“No,” confirmed Fury. “That was years ago. But you could have obtained that information from Stark. That’s why I’m suspicious still because you were never close to Stark before and now you are. You’ve been working with him since May. You would have plenty of months of memories to be able to draw upon. We could bring Stark in, question him, and see if he is the real Stark too. But if he wasn’t real he wouldn’t have the knowledge to tell you about Agent Romanoff which makes his identity assured.”

“He wasn’t too pleased about leaving me here whilst you sought to confirm who I am,” stated Natasha.

“There is an easier way to clear this up,” interrupted Carol. She reached into her jean’s pocket and pulled out a small device, almost a wristwatch. “This is a scanner. It has the ability to determine if you are a Skrull or not. It can detect the chemical changes required for you to mimic others. It was developed a few years back. One simple scan is enough.”

“And you couldn’t have bought this up before?” argued Natasha. “It would have saved us this whole conversation if you’d shown it in the first place!”

Carol shrugged. “Fury’s decision, not mine.” She opened up the scanner and a hologram flashed up
above the screen. Pointing it at Natasha, she moved it up and down from head to toe and then from side to side. It beeped and then the hologram above the device turned green. Carol turned to Fury. “She’s human. Fully human.”

“Finally.” Natasha rolled her eyes, glad the whole thing was over.

Fury leaned back against the wall. “I suppose we do have a time-traveller on our hands then.”

“Two of us. Tony and I. No one else knows.”

“Apart from Pepper Potts,” mused Fury.

“How did you guess?” Natasha had hoped to keep Pepper’s identity as the other person who had known the secret.

“Stark only trusts three people,” stated Fury carefully. “Potts would be at number one and if he is going to tell anyone he is from the future, it would be her. It hadn’t escaped my notice they had been taking a break and now they are back together.” He leaned forward. “Stark may think he can spy on our activities but we also spy on him.”

“Oh, he knows,” replied Natasha. She turned her gaze to Carol. “We need your help which is why I asked for Fury to send for you.”

Carol pressed her lips together. “What for?”

Natasha bit her lower lip. “A mission. One that can help Tony and I stop the inevitable from happening. We need to stop Thanos from achieving his goal. And only you can help us do so.”

As promised back in June to Aunt May, Peter’s internship with Stark Industries began on the first Friday in August. School had already broken for Peter and for his first overnight stay at the Avenger’s Facility, Tony had made sure he had been the one to pick Peter up from his Aunt’s place in Queens, once again reassuring her that he had no plans to include Peter on further Avenger missions at the present time.

They were in Tony’s lab together looking over the designs for Peter’s Spider-Man suit. Tony was showing him all the nifty adjustments he had made and was taking him through the ‘training wheels’ protocol he intended to deactivate for Peter once the kid was aware of all the nifty things his suit could do. Tony had given it to him for the Winter Soldiers mission.

Peter scratched the side of his head. “Why did you install a parachute again? I don’t need one!”

“In case you fall from a great height and there is nothing for you to use your webs to reach?” Tony quipped back. “Just don’t get tangled in it.”

“But that wouldn’t happen!” grinned Peter.

Tony wasn’t amused. “In my experience, kid, it’s better to be prepared for anything.”

Which was why when he had designed and built his final Iron Man suit he had put in the safety feature of being able to contain and use the Infinity Stones. It had been a feature Tony had added knowing full well if he had to use them, he’d die. At the end that had been the future Strange had seen. Tony’s fate had always been inexplicably linked to the Infinity Stones.
“I don’t want anything to happen to you. With a parachute, you’re ready for anything. And it can be deployed if your new A.I inside the suit senses you are incapacitated and unable to activate it. Parachute is a must. It’s staying.” Tony wasn’t going to take no for answer.

“What else is in my suit?” Peter leaned over the holographic table studying the other contents of the suit.

Tony frowned, his fingers twirling the Spider-Man suit around in the holographic display. “Plenty of things, kid. Depends, I could create a whole new suit for you.” He was thinking of the Iron Spider suit. “It would be a lot more advanced than the one I have already given you.”

“Mr. Stark, you don’t-”

Tony raised his hand. “Please, it is Tony.” He had a feeling he would be reminding Peter to call him Tony for a while yet. He’d been dying when he’d faintly heard Peter call his name… He hadn’t been able to answer, he’d been saving what remained of his strength for Pepper. “Besides, I have a habit of upgrading everything. Nothing is ever good enough. You always need something… more.” He’d kept on designing and improving Iron Man suits because he felt the current model wasn’t the answer to the universal threat that was Thanos. He’d later learned none of his suits was a match to him, though the nano-suit had been his best at the time. He’d still failed.

Peter winced. “Am I going to get more suits from you?”

“Probably. Better get used to it, kid, I’m going to be a big part of your life!” Tony grinned. “Now… what else shall I show you?”

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Once Tony had finished taking Peter through the suit, he’d told Peter he would lift the restrictions on the suit a bit at a time so Peter could get used to all its various functions. The A.I installed in the suit would be one of the last things which would be activated as Tony wanted Peter to learn without it. Peter agreed with Tony’s assessment and was looking forward to using the Avengers training area to test out his new suit in a variety of trials in varying environments.

They had now moved onto other projects, including new designs for Stark Industries, which Tony hoped Peter would leave his mark on. He wanted the kid to be involved with the company in the future, even if it was in an unofficial capacity.

Tony was flickering through different designs, using paper to write down a few calculations and numbers, whilst Peter worked beside him, looking at prototypes and giving him his honest opinion. Tony hoped they could use the feedback to create a new improved product.

It was then he felt a familiar tingle in his mind but he couldn’t place what it was. Therefore he was surprised when Natasha’s voice echoed in his mind and he jerked a bit. He didn’t know what she was doing there but he hoped she wasn’t bringing him the bad news.

Tony, do you mind? I’m bored sitting in this room waiting for Danvers… Just wanted to explore what I can do…

A slight smile tugged at his lips. He was surprised Natasha had waited this long to try exploring further. He didn’t mind. She had unparalleled access to his soul for a reason. Besides, Natasha exploring further may enable them both to come to an understanding of their link.

He wrote ‘I don’t mind’ on a piece of scrap paper.
Tony went back to work.

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“I think it is time you went to bed,” said Tony, his eyes seeking out Peter. The kid was clearly tired. They’d been at work in the lab for over six hours and it was way past midnight. He was sure Pepper would yell at him for letting Peter stay up this late. Time went by quickly when one was having fun and Peter had the natural flair for designing that Tony had.

“But it’s not even that late!” Peter didn’t look up from the design, his tongue poking out the edge of his mouth as he concentrated on tracing over lines on the hologram.

“It’s after midnight. Just because I work through the night doesn’t mean you have the option to do so.” Tony stayed firm. “And I promised your Aunt you wouldn’t have too many late nights.”

Peter finally glanced up from his design. “But she won’t know.”

Tony frowned. “Only if I do not tell her. Who says I wouldn’t? I was going to tell her about you being Spider-Man after all…” He trailed off, ensuring Peter was aware that Tony intended to abide by the rules his Aunt had set down for Peter’s visits to the Compound.

Peter sighed, saved his work and walked towards the lab’s door. “I can come back tomorrow before I leave, right?”

“Sure. Remember I’m taking you home at 4pm.” Tony watched him leave before contemplating his own work and decided to close it before heading up to bed.

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Saturday 6th August 2016

Pepper called Tony from the lab around 11:15 am the following day, leaving Peter on his own. He instructed FRIDAY to inform him if Peter made a move to leave. The kid was curious enough to want to know why Tony had been called away.

He found Pepper sitting in their private common area of the Compound with Natasha and Carol Danvers.

“Finally got free,” said Natasha. “Before we start, Fury knows about us being from the future, as does Carol. It was the only way to convince them.”

Taken back by the admission, Tony stepped back. “I thought we weren’t telling anyone.”

“We aren’t. Fury and Carol have agreed to maintain our secrecy. It hadn’t escaped Fury’s notice that we had been working together more often. It raised his suspicions. But he won’t tell anyone else. He understands why we need to keep our conditions a secret,” explained Natasha carefully.

Tony joined Pepper on the couch. Carol was watching him. “I remember you.”

“I don’t remember you,” stated Carol.

“You won’t. But you won’t forget me,” grinned Tony.

Pepper slapped him on the arm. “You won’t. It’s impossible to forget him.”
“We’ll see.” Carol leaned forward. “You have a request to make? A mission?”

Tony nodded, squeezing Pepper’s hand. “We do.”

“Tony, do you want to do the honours?” asked Natasha.

“Err… sure?” He’d been expecting Natasha to be the one to talk to Carol and ask her but he could understand Natasha’s reasoning for wanting him there as well.

Carol focused her steely gaze upon him.

It made him slightly uncomfortable.

“We need to get in contact with a group who call themselves the ‘Guardians of the Galaxy’. Have you heard of them?” enquired Tony.

“I have. I’ve never encountered them before but I’ve heard rumours about them. Why do you need them?” she responded.

“First, they have a ship which would be useful to move around the universe in. Secondly, they know a bit more about the Infinity Stones and where some of them currently are. We need to retrieve them before Thanos does.”

“I could just kill Thanos for you.” Carol’s hands glowed in her lap.

“No.” Natasha shook her head. “Killing Thanos right now is not the solution. He may be a tyrant or whatever he is out in the universe, but he has an army.”

“I can take out ships with my hands alone.” Carol was adamant and Tony couldn’t blame her. He’d watched her take out Thanos’ command ship during the battle. She was fully capable of carrying out her threat.

“We were sent back for a reason,” continued Natasha quietly. “I think if the answer was as simple as you going off to kill him, we wouldn’t be here. We’ve been given this chance to do things again…Tony and I have to be the ones to face him.”

“But if she could, Nat, why not?” asked Tony. If it was as simple as sending Carol off to kill Thanos…

Natasha caught his eye. “I do not believe it is that simple,” she repeated.

Sadly, Tony didn’t either. “You had trouble killing him before.”

“I fought him?” Carol’s head twitched slightly to the side. “And lost?”

“You did,” admitted Tony. Natasha hadn’t been there. “It was a close call though. He’s after the Infinity Stones. We need to stop him from gathering them by finding them ourselves and destroying them. But we also need a ship to go out into space. Since the Guardians helped us before, we wanted to bring them in on this. We lack the technology to send a message out there or build something quickly to reach out to them. That’s why we’d like you to find them for us and ask them to come to Earth.”

Carol inclined her head. “I could do that.”

“And you won’t go after Thanos?” asked Natasha.
Carol sighed, her shoulder slumping slightly. “I won’t. But only because it feels… right?… to leave him to you.”

Later that evening, after Carol had departed Earth to seek out the Guardians and Tony had driven Peter back home to Queens, Tony and Pepper lay in bed together. Pepper’s head rested on Tony’s shoulder and his right arm was wrapped around her body, holding her close to him.

“It’s going to start now, isn’t it?” she asked quietly. “Now you’ve got Carol going out there…”

“It is, Pep. But we both knew that.”

“You’ve got to go out there, haven’t you? Into the stars. If you want those stones…”

Tony’s lips twitched. “I have no choice. I don’t want to… but Nat and I can only rely on each other to get these stones destroyed. And we can’t get into space on our own. I may be a genius and I have knowledge of the future, but we do not have the materials to ensure safe spaceflight from one end of the galaxy to the other. I could design something but it wouldn’t be a simple or quick build.” Tony pressed a kiss to her head. “I’d rather not go into space again. I have no choice though, I have to.”

“New York?” she guessed.

Tony nodded. “And… Titan.” He’d not informed Pepper of his other trip to space. “I didn’t want to tell you but I went to space again. I was chasing after one of the Infinity Stones, trying to prevent Thanos from getting it. It went straight to him. He would have gotten it anyway, regardless of any decision I’d have made. That was the place where Peter died in my arms. It was where I faced Thanos for the first time. I nearly died there, Pep. I was stabbed there. He wanted to kill me…”

“But he didn’t,” she said gently. “Tony? Wherever you need to go, I’m going to be there, whether it is in space or not.”

“Pep… you can’t,” he pleaded.

“Tony, I promised you I would be there for you. I mean it. Every step of the way.” She leaned up now, resting on her elbow.

“I don’t want to see you die…” he whispered.

“You won’t,” Pepper reassured him. Leaning down to kiss him on the lips, Pepper ran a hand down his face. “If you are going to die, Tony, I’m spending as much time with you as possible, whether it is on Earth or off it. I’m not leaving you.”

Tony turned his head away. “I don’t deserve you.”

Taking his chin, she turned his head back towards her. “You deserve me, Tony.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t.” He didn’t want to believe it. How could he be so lucky?

“No matter what happens we’ll face it together, the way we have faced everything for the last twenty years. It won’t ever change. You were sent back here for a reason. You were told to trust me with the truth for a reason. Destiny bought us together, destiny will keep us together.”

Tony pulled her closer. “You’re right like you always are. I died but destiny sent me back.
Whatever forces are at work they wanted me to trust you. And I will.” He smiled, and pulled her closer, kissing her on the head.

It didn’t take long for them to fall asleep snuggled in each other’s arms.

To be continued...

Tony and Pepper illustration from Chapter Twelve: Wakanda when they are on the balcony looking out. Illustrated by the talented JediPanda22. Please check out their other work on Instagram!

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

It's pretty obvious from all the hints I've been dropping that Tony does have powers... He just can't use them yet but I can promise they will come!

Fury was mostly convinced it was Natasha at the end of the last chapter but he still wanted Carol to confirm she wasn't a Skrull. Even though at the moment, the MCU has shown the Skrulls to be victims and the good guys, I'm sure there would be bad fractions of them still out there, so I can still see Fury being suspicious of anyone being a Skrull.

Carol will be in the story but not much. She won't appear again for a while.

Up next: The Mind Stone... Vision, Wanda, Tony and Shuri...

To be posted next Sunday!
Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Sixteen: The Mind Stone

Chapter Summary

Tony and Natasha focus their attention upon destroying the Mind Stone...

Chapter Notes

Erm... Hi, everyone! *waves*

Apologies for not updating last week, had things happen at work which triggered my anxiety on Friday 22nd November and I was unable to write. By Sunday I had only written 1000 words so I couldn't post. However, to make up for that, this chapter is 7000 words. If my chapters start to exceed 4000 words on a regular basis I may not be able to update weekly, even with a good week at work. I will try to update weekly but I may not be able to, especially as we move further into the story.

I hope this chapter makes up for the lack of a chapter last week!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Mind Stone

Wednesday 24th August 2016

Avengers Compound

The training area had been in use every day by Wanda as she sought to improve control of her powers and learn to test her limits. Vision was a regular visitor, instructing Wanda on the best techniques to use and how to maintain her control without draining herself.

Tony hadn’t kept an eye on Wanda’s progress, mainly because he didn’t see he needed to. He knew what she was capable of; it was just reaching that potential when it was needed most. She’d get there, he knew.

He watched from above as Wanda levitated pieces of disused machinery and threw them across the room with as much force as she could muster. Sweat was beading down her forehead and her fingertips glowed red, exuding energy in all directions.

Vision pointed to another set of machinery, this time instructing Wanda to step further away. Tony observed as she once again levitated the objects and sent them flying in all directions. One piece went through Vision.

“Vision! I’m so sorry!”
“It doesn’t matter, Wanda. Sometimes in situations, you will just have to act without planning ahead.”

“But I can’t lose control. The effects could be disastrous...” muttered Wanda. “I could hurt a team-mate! I could accidentally kill them! No,” she shook her head vigorously, “I need to learn to use these powers wisely and with control and with meaning.”

Tony started to walk down into the training area. “If it’s a choice of saving the world, Wanda, or saving a team-mate, what would you do?”

The young Sokovian bit her lower lip, head bowed. “I know what the right thing to do would be... but do I have the strength to do it?”

Tony stopped in front of her, a slight smile on his face. “You do.” Because he knew she had. She had killed Vision when there had been no other choice. She was strong enough. “Sometimes we have to make difficult choices, whether it is sacrificing our own lives for the greater good or sacrificing others to ensure the survivability of the universe at large.” Doctor Strange had sacrificed Tony for the greater good and Tony had given up the life he loved to ensure everyone he loved could live.

Wanda was fully capable of making those sacrifices too.

_I hope she never has to make them this time._

“Why do you have so much faith in me?” asked Wanda curiously.

“Because I believe you are a true asset to this team, Wanda,” explained Tony. “You could become the most powerful of us all. I think you underestimate yourself. It’s only been a few weeks and I can already see improvement with how you control and use your powers. Vision is right though, if there is ever a time when you need to just act without thinking, it will be because you are faced with a choice between life and death. I have faith in you to make the right choices.”

“I’m afraid I don’t believe you...” she muttered quietly.

Tony chuckled. “I know. I think you’ll surprise yourself one day.” He shifted his gaze to Vision before settling back on Wanda. “I’m here for another reason too. I need to talk to you both about an urgent matter that only you two can help us with.”

“Us?” caught Wanda. “Only you are here.”

“Nat and I,” he clarified. “She’s busy elsewhere but she knows what I’m here for.” He ended in a serious voice.

“What is it?” Even Wanda sounded a little worried.

Tony’s eyes focused upon the Mind Stone in Vision’s head. “Can we go somewhere private?”

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Wanda’s quarters were the closest, a place Tony had only been in once when he had been designing the Compound for the new Avengers team before he had departed after the Ultron incident. He’d never thought he’d be welcome in her room. Times had changed.

Wanda sat on the bed, leaning back against the wall, whilst Vision stood next to her as Tony paced the room. He wasn’t sure how to begin with this conversation. He knew it would be a difficult one.
Finally, he stopped pacing and stood in front of Wanda, hands behind his back, almost like he was about to give a speech. “The Stone in your head, Vision, it needs to come out.” It wasn’t the best start.

“But he’ll die!” Wanda rejected.

Tony shook his head, rubbing the back of his head over the awkwardness of his beginning. “No. It’s complicated. I don’t know how to propose this to you two…” Could he tell them he was from the future? After all, Carol and Fury now knew. He’d hoped no one else would find out but it seemed events would spiral out of control which would mean they’d have to be told at some point. Was there any reason to keep on hiding their secret from the rest of their teammates?

“Thor told Steve and I about the Infinity Stones before he left Earth after Ultron. Since then Nat and I have learned more information about them. One of the stones is in Vision’s head. Though Thor deemed you worthy to keep it, I fear there is a danger in its continued existence here.”

“How so?” asked Vision, his fingers moving up to his head to gently touch the glowing yellow stone.

“I’ve had a recurring nightmare… Nat has it too, of a future where all of these stones are collected together and used against the universe.” It was the best way to explain their future without revealing everything. “I don’t know if what I see is real but it is concerning both Natasha and I see the same thing. That is why we’ve been working together a lot because we fear these visions, these nightmares could come true.” He bowed his head. “When I went through the portal in New York, stopping the advancing alien force, I saw how large that army truly was, what else is out there. There is no doubt in my mind that something worse is coming. And we have to be prepared for it.”

Wanda looked worriedly at Vision, then back at Tony. “But how do we save Vision’s life? Taking it out would kill him.”

“I have a solution. Wakanda.”

“But that’s one of the poorest countries in the world!” retorted Wanda. “How can they help?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Wakanda isn’t what it seems to be.” Tony didn’t smile. “They can help remove the Stone without killing Vision.”

Vision touched the Stone in his forehead. “This is an entity we know nothing about. What do you intend to do with it once it is removed?”

“Destroy it.” There was no other way. They couldn’t leave the Stones intact for Thanos to find.

“How?” asked Wanda.

Tony nodded towards her. “You. Your powers come from the Mind Stone. I think you’d be quite capable of destroying it.”

“Me?” Wanda’s eyes widened. “I don’t think I can…”

“You underestimate yourself, Wanda,” said Tony quietly. “Your powers came from experiments on the stone. It stands to reason the same composition would be effective in destroying it.”

“Mr. Stark, these things are ancient. Should we be messing with the very fabric of reality by destroying something so unique to the universe at large?” Vision asked, the concern evident in his
voice. “What if in doing so it causes ramifications we cannot foresee?”

Vision did have a point.

Tony sighed. “All good points but I know for a fact destroying these stones will not cause lasting ramifications for the universe at large.”

“You cannot know that,” replied Vision.

“I can,” stated Tony, determined to stay firm on this point. Thanos had destroyed them in 2018 after wiping out half the universe. Nothing bad had happened then but Wanda and Vision didn’t know that.

“How?” Wanda tilted her head to the side, curiously.

Should I tell them? he asked thoughtfully. More people were coming to know their secret regardless. He wondered how many more people would learn his and Natasha’s secret.

Let her read your mind… the voice suggested.

Tony winced at the thought of Wanda poking around his mind. He wasn’t sure he wanted her to do that. What would she be able to see? If she reads my mind she’ll realise I’m from the future.

Exactly, the voice seemed to be endorsing it.

Clearly the voice wanted Wanda to know.

Tony sighed. “Look into my mind and I’ll prove it to you.”

Wanda shook her head. “No. I can’t. I’ve already imposed on your mind once. I cannot do it again.”

He caught her gaze. “This time you have permission.”

Wanda bit her lower lip. “Are you sure? What if I see something you don’t want me to see?”

“Everything is there for you to see,” he stated calmly. “Wanda, neither of you will believe what I say unless I offer you proof. The only way I can is for you to read my mind. Telling you may not be enough.”

“Vision?” Wanda turned to Vision. “Should I?”

Vision locked gazes with Tony as he replied to Wanda. “I think if Mr. Stark is insistent upon having his mind read it would be discourteous to deny his request. We seek confirmation of his words, of his sincerity of this threat which faces us… If he can provide proof without resorting to his mind being read, I suggest it is our only viable option to comply with his request.”

Tony wasn’t sure if Vision was on his side or not but it helped he was trying to convince Wanda the only way was to use her powers on Tony’s mind.

“Ok,” said Wanda quietly, “I’ll do it… but I don’t want to.”

Tony nodded and moved to sit at the edge of the bed as Wanda moved towards him, kneeling on the fabric of the bed, holding her hands to the side of his head. Gently her fingers brushed the sides of his face before pressing thin fingers to his temple.
He felt prodding in his mind as Wanda’s thoughts invaded his own. It was different from when Natasha was in his mind. It felt right, connected as they were. With Wanda, it was an intrusion. It didn’t feel right. He winced as he felt her probe further.

He threw up images he wanted her to see. He showed her Thanos, he showed her the Infinity Stones. He showed her the time he fought Thanos and lost. He showed Wanda her own fight against Thanos during the battle where Tony had died. He showed her what she was truly capable of. What she could do with her powers. And then he showed her his death before waking up in 2016.

She pulled back abruptly, falling back on the bed, panting heavily, her eyes wide.

“Wanda?” Vision leaned down concern written across his features. “What happened? What did you see?”

Wanda levered herself up onto her elbows, her eyes still focused upon Tony. “You… You…” she whispered, her voice soft.

“Now you know how I know.”

“Wanda? What did you see?” Vision tried again.

She took deep breaths in. “We have to destroy it.” She turned to face Vision, raising her fingers to hover before the Stone embedded in his head. “It’s the only way to prevent what is to come.”

Tony watched carefully. She wasn’t telling Vision what she’d seen or what she now knew. “Wanda, you can-?”

She raised a hand to stop him. “No. The fewer people that know the safer Tony will be.”

“Know what, Wanda?” Vision flicked his gaze between Wanda and Tony.

“He speaks the truth,” continued Wanda. “It is not in his interests for people to know, Vision. I’m sorry.” Her lips twitched. “Can you trust me? Can you trust me to trust him?”

Vision floated away. “I’ve known Mr. Stark for years. I can trust both of you. But keeping secrets when we are a team is… We should be open and honest with one another.”

Tony watched carefully. He didn’t want to interfere. This was a discussion between Wanda and Vision.

“And if in telling you puts Tony in danger?” asked Wanda quietly.

“Why would telling me put Mr. Stark in danger?” Vision couldn’t comprehend the logic.

“Because…” Wanda lowered her gaze, “the very same threat that is after your Stone will be after Tony too. If he gets you… and finds out what Tony really is… We’ll lose the last hope we have.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. Wanda was speaking prophetically as if he had some big destiny. He supposed he did have considering he had been sent back in time to fix things but to label him as the last hope was folly. He decided to step in. “I’m not the last hope. There are the rest of you. All of us are the last line of defence.”

Wanda shifted on the bed, twisting her body once more to face him. “No. What I see inside you is far more powerful than you can imagine. No. You are our last line of defence. You and Natasha…"
You’ll be the last ones standing…” Then she glanced back at Vision. “The only way to save Tony is to keep his secret safe. Otherwise… we’ll lose…”

Vision floated backward. “There is much of the world I have yet to learn. Whatever you saw in his mind… It scares you.”

“It did,” admitted Wanda. “But I know what I saw was the truth. And if we are to survive this, we have to put our faith in Tony. We have to destroy the Stone. I know it without a doubt.” She moved from the bed, towards Vision, resting her hands on his chest, looking up at his face. “Believe in me, please.”

This time Vision didn’t argue, only nodded his assent.

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Tony lingered in Wanda’s room after Vision left, leaning against the wall, arms folded over his chest. “Now you know…”

Wanda looked at him. “You’re from the future.”

“Where I died,” he noted. “Are you not afraid of what I know?”

“No,” she answered.

“Does it matter I’m from the future? Do you still want us to be friends? I’ve already lied to you.”

Wanda shook her head. “It doesn’t matter to me. I’m not the first to know, am I?”

“No. A few others do not know such as Steve, Clint, or Rhodey…Nor do Thor and Bruce.”

“You know where they are though,” she pointed out. “Thor and Banner.”

“I do. But I can’t reach them.”

Wanda frowned. “This… alien… I saw in your mind… the one you defeated… He’s coming, isn’t he?”

“He will be,” admitted Tony, his lips twitching. He moved from the wall and slowly paced around the room. “There are six Infinity Stones scattered across the universe. Two are on Earth. I want to destroy them before he can get here to claim them. Saving Vision’s life is a priority for me. And I know the method I want to use will work because Wakanda was involved last time.”

“Were they successful in removing the Stone?”

Tony sighed. “They… never got as far as being able to remove it before Thanos arrived.” He left it at that knowing Wanda would be able to deduce the truth from his words. “We have time now to ensure the Stone is completely destroyed before Thanos even gets close to Earth. And you have the power to destroy it, Wanda. You just have to believe in yourself.”

Her lips twitched. “So do you, Stark.”

He wasn’t going to argue the point. “What you said about Nat and I being the last line of defence… How do you know?”

“I don’t know. It’s a feeling… When you let me into your mind, I felt like my powers were resonating with you, giving me a glimpse of what is to come, but only in thoughts not in images.
You were sent back for a reason, Tony. You and Natasha. I just feel deep down that you two are the most important pieces we have. I can’t explain it, but I believe it,” she explained quietly. “Vision can’t know about you. Too many people know already. This… Thanos… if he’s hunting for these Stones, he’ll be after you.”

“I’m surprised you managed to convince Vision. I didn’t mind him knowing.”

“The further he is away from this, the safer he will be. The Mind Stone is powerful. What if this Thanos gets it and deduces who you are from it? What you are? And all become one more person knows?”

“Thanos already knows who I am,” replied Tony. “He told me so when I first met him.”

“But that was then, not now,” continued Wanda. “You’re still Tony Stark but you are also something more… and that something more, whatever it is cannot be revealed to Thanos before the time is right. I just know we have to keep you safe for as long as possible.”

Tony hummed. He didn’t like these vague hints he was someone special or this destiny he supposedly had with Natasha at his side. He recognised what his role was, no matter how much he wanted to escape from it. “Wanda… When he comes to Earth, I’ll have to face him. I can’t be protected forever.”

Wanda sought his eyes, reaching for his hands. “I fear, now that I know what we face and who you are, that he’ll come for you when you least expect it. And you’ll have no way to defend yourself.”

“I’m always prepared,” said Tony. He held her by the shoulders, moving his hands from hers to grip her by the arms. “Wanda, this is why it is important we find and destroy these Stones. Vision’s is just one of six that need to be destroyed.”

She lowered her gaze, moving away from Tony. “We will. And now that I know what I can do, what I could be too… I know I have to be with you on your hunt for the Stones.” She raised her eyes towards the ceiling. “Even if it means going out there to do it.”

Tony raised his eyebrows, surprised by Wanda’s insistence. “Wanda…”

“You need me,” she replied. She held her right hand up, flickers of red energy dancing between her fingers, fixing him with an intense stare. “Maybe I can destroy more than one stone?”

“Maybe you can,” he admitted. He hoped she could. It would make their mission a lot simpler if Wanda’s powers affected every Infinity Stone. Tony almost doubted it but they wouldn’t know unless they tried.

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**Thursday 25th August 2016**

**En-route to Wakanda**

“Wanda knows,” said Tony, slipping into the seat beside Natasha as she piloted the QuinJet towards Wakanda.

“Does she now? The total number of people knowing about us seems to keep on rising. Why not go all out and reveal it to every member of the Avengers?” Natasha noted.

Tony chuckled. “I think if we are supposed to tell everyone we would have been guided to do so. It
feels there are certain people who are important to the endgame that needs to know. Others not so much… Wanda was supposed to know… Vision wasn’t. But he knows something is different about us because of the conversation Wanda and I had in his presence.”

Natasha frowned, flipping a few switches on the console to put the QuinJet into autopilot. “Maybe he doesn’t need to know the full truth because once the Stone is removed he will be insignificant?” she suggested. “He won’t have the powers of the Stone anymore, will he?”

“No… he won’t.” Tony bit his lower lip. “Wanda wants to protect him. But she also implied something else, Nat.” He shifted in his seat a bit so he was fully facing Natasha.

She turned in her own chair, noticing the apprehension in the air. “It’s got you spooked.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. A bit. We’re the last line of defence. The two of us. I don’t want to be. But I know whatever bought us back is lining us up to be just that. Wanda also implied I’m in danger. That Thanos will come for the Stones… and for me.”

Natasha swallowed. “But not me?”

“Apparently not.”

“I’m not the one who threw a missile at his army and destroyed it, am I?” she quipped, grinning slightly despite the seriousness of the conversation.

“Kinda wish I hadn’t done it now.” Tony winced and sighed.

“Can’t change the past, can we?”

Tony threw her a glare. “Not funny. Especially considering that is what we are doing.”

“One could argue this is now our present…”

Tony groaned, leaning back in his chair. “How did I get stuck with you?”

“Believe me, I wish I knew.” Natasha continued to tease.

Running a hand through his hair, Tony slumped forward. “Wanda also believes I am incredibly powerful…”

“You are. When I was in your mind, I saw it.”

“I don’t want powers!” he grated out.

Natasha leaned forward, resting a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “We cannot help what we are, Tony, only do what we can with the gifts we have been given. I’ve accepted I have these powers. I think you need to decide whether to embrace it or not. But these powers we’ve come back with? They wouldn’t have come back with us if we didn’t need them. I saw the potential in you, but it is in chains. Whether it is because you don’t want them or it is not time yet… You need to embrace them.”

“I know. But at the moment I can’t. Nat… I just can’t.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Believe me, Tony, this is the last thing I wanted for any of us.” Natasha rubbed his shoulder. “I’m embracing mine because I know I have to.”

Tony remained silent.
“You might need them one day,” she pointed out.

“Maybe,” admitted Tony. He stood from his chair. “I’m going to go back to Pepper. I’ll come by when we’re coming into land.”

Natasha smiled, watching as he began to walk away. “Tony?”

“Yeah?” He glanced over his shoulder.

“If Wanda is right and Thanos does come for you… I’m going to be there. I’m not going to let him take you. Or hurt you.”

Tony smirked. “Romanoff, it's appreciated but there are people here who need you. If Thanos is going to come after me, I don’t want you getting in the way.”

“Tough, Stark. I’m ignoring everything you say. I’m there whether you like it or not because there are people who need you too. Not just Pepper, but Morgan too.”

Tony chuckled, shaking his head. “I knew you were gonna say that.”

“Don’t underestimate me, Stark.”

Tony laughed again and walked away leaving Natasha to bring them to Wakanda, where he hoped they could destroy the Mind Stone.

Wakanda

Friday 26th August 2016

“Are you sure you want to do this?” asked Shuri.

Vision lay on the table in Shuri’s lab. “I am.”

Tony stood to the side, arms across his chest, watching intently with Natasha standing next to Wanda. He understood what Shuri was trying to do to save Vision’s life. It was something he could potentially have done himself but he knew Shuri’s technology was better equipped with dealing with removing such a powerful object without harming what made Vision, Vision.

She was in the process of duplicating Vision’s cell activity and data. Shuri had noted the structure was polymorphic. Tony had explained they’d had to attach each neuron non-sequentially, but to save Vision’s life Shuri had to reprogram the synapses to work collectively. There were more than two trillion neurons in Vision and even a small misalignment could cause circuit failures, a situation they needed to avoid.

Thankfully, Shuri had time to work on ensuring the correct alignment, a luxury she hadn’t had before.

Thanos wasn’t breathing down their necks this time either, allowing the work to proceed at a more leisurely pace.

Shuri had estimated the work separating Vision from the stone could take at least a few hours, potentially more. She was barely ten percent through the work.

Tony wasn’t sure he should be observing but he wanted to be here to witness the Stone’s
destruction. Wanda had been practising using her powers and he believed she had the capability to destroy it. She just needed the focus to do so and the will to carry it out, two things Wanda was capable of having.

If they could destroy this Stone today they would be one small step closer to stopping Thanos for good. Even destroying one would prevent him from winning but they couldn’t take any chances. They needed to destroy all of them to ensure complete victory. If Tony could work out time travel, it wasn’t beyond the realms of possibility that Thanos could as well.

Especially since Thanos had.

Tony shuddered. Bringing everyone back and the Compound getting blown apart in a series of missiles strikes had been horrific. The Avengers had been lucky to survive to fight back and marshal the last defence of Earth. That Thanos had time travelled. Still, he had still been an overwhelming threat that needed to be fought back against.

Noticing movement to the right, Tony saw Pepper nodding gently towards him from the doorway. Catching Natasha’s eyes, Tony motioned with his head that he’d be back shortly.

Walking across the room, Tony smiled and then embraced Pepper in a warm hug. “Hey. How are the contracts going?”

“We’re done,” answered Pepper quietly. “All the contracts are signed and Stark Industries and Wakanda are now partners. I’m glad I came on this trip. They’ve even agreed to allow our top researchers and scientists a chance to come here and spend a month learning about Vibranium and how technology can advance with it, providing, of course, they sign contracts preventing them from spilling the true nature of Wakanda’s advancement. I think that’s something we can agree upon. How are things going here?” She indicated Vision on the table behind Tony.

“Slowly, but she’ll get there,” answered Tony. “If all goes according to plan, Shuri should remove the Stone later today. We’ll be able to take a flight home tomorrow.”

“Good news,” Pepper pulled slightly away from Tony. “Do you mind if I take a look around the market? There isn’t much more I can do here…”

“Wanting to spend more of my money, Potts?” teased Tony, gently brushing his lips against hers.

“Always, Mr. Stark,” responded Pepper, wrapping her arms around his neck and deepening the kiss, their bodies pressing close together.

Tony grinned, nipping her bottom lip before pulling back. “Tonight?” Now was not the time to engage in any other sort of activity, no matter how much Tony wanted to take her back to their room and ravish her.

Pepper's cheeks went pink. “I look forward to it, Mr. Stark.” She leaned in and kissed him again before pulling out of his reach and turning to walk away.

Tony couldn’t stop looking until she was out of his eyesight.

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“Done!” Shuri announced. A tired smile flickered across her face as she finally pulled back from the holographic screen she had been working from as the machines hovering over Vision’s head retracted back into their holders. She stepped back and turned to look down at Vision.
“I think we can remove the Stone. It shouldn’t be attached to any of his neurons or connective pathways.”

Tony walked forwards. “Maybe it is best to remove it without using our hands? These Stones are incredibly powerful. Handling them can be dangerous though some are less lethal.”

Shuri reached for a small pair of metallic tweezers. “Would these do?”

“Should be,” confirmed Tony. He stepped back beside Natasha. “Here we go.”

Carefully Shuri placed the tweezers around the Mind Stone. “Ready?” she asked, her gaze focusing on Wanda.

“I am,” the other replied. Little cusps of energy danced out of Wanda’s fingertips.

“Are you sure everything is now working collectively?” asked Natasha, a hint of worry in her voice.

“Affirmative,” reassured Shuri. “Removing this shouldn’t harm Vision at all. Since he is artificial in nature, and born into a synthetic body made from Vibranium, and is in some sense classed as an android, if removing the Stone puts him offline, I have the means to bring him back. I’ve stored his cell activity and data, backed it up to this point. But I do not believe I will need to rely on this data. Your consciousness shouldn’t be connected to the Stone anymore and you are still here, alive and well, suggesting the entirety of your consciousness wasn’t completely linked to the Stone. Your consciousness may have been separating since you were born, as you evolved and came to understand the world around you.”

“It seems a viable theory,” replied Vision.

“Ready for the Stone to be removed?” asked Shuri. He’d already said yes but now was the last possible instant where they could back out of this.

Do it,” confirmed Vision.

“Wanda, be ready,” added Tony. He didn’t need to tell her, she already was.

Gently, using the tweezers, Shuri placed the two sides around the Stone and gently *pulled*.

The Stone came loose from where it had sat in Vision’s forehead.

“Vision, are you still good?” Natasha asked as Shuri walked past her to place the shining yellow Stone upon a smooth workbench situated beside Wanda.

“Feel slightly different… Not as strong as I was before.” Vision sat up, gently tracing his fingers over the outline of where the Mind Stone had once sat. “Maybe I have become more human? Less advanced than I originally was?”

“Well, we did theorise this might be what would happen to you,” replied Natasha quietly. “Your abilities come from the Stone. With it now removed and no longer linked to you, you may have lost your abilities.”

“Reasonable.” Vision swung his legs over the table, his eyes focused upon Wanda as she approached the workbench on the other side of the room.

Tony followed Wanda, rounding the bench, placing his palms upon it and looked up at Wanda.
“I can do this,” she muttered underneath her breath.

“You can,” replied Tony. “Focus. Don’t strain yourself. Take your time and increase the energy bit by bit.”

Wanda nodded and raised her right hand. Whispers of red energy danced across her fingertips, flowing outwards towards the Stone.

Tony stepped back, raising his hand to cover his eyes, shielding them from the bright light of Wanda’s powers as they steadily increased in intensity as she increased the power slowly. Her face was beginning to redden, straining to increase her powers to a safe degree.

Wanda shifted her feet, balancing herself more securely as she added her other hand to the power flowing from her fingertips. The Mind Stone began to glow as the heat intensified, small tiny cracks beginning to appear across its surface.

Tony indicated for everyone to step back, all the occupants of the lab pressing their backs against the wall. Most of Shuri’s work was securely held in place, hopefully preventing any destruction to the work she had been working on.

“Urgh!” Wanda strained, her hair flowing out behind her as she increased the energy. “Nearly… there!” Her whole body was shaking in an effort to maintain the flow from her fingertips.

The cracks along the Stone lengthened and deepened and then broke.

The pieces of the Stone flew in different directions and a cosmic wave rocked out, throwing Wanda back, sliding her across the lab, rolling over and landing face down. The rest rocked the wave as it hit them all, pressing them back against the wall for a moment as it rushed over them.

The small shards of the stone cluttered to the floor and Tony rushed forwards, kneeling down beside Wanda. Reaching out, he gently turned her over.

“Did I… do it?” she asked.

Tony nodded. “You did.” He helped her up, pointing to the shattered remains of the Stone on the floor. “It’s gone. One down.”

Wanda got to her feet. “Vision?”

“I’m fine, Wanda.” Vision stepped towards her as Tony supported her.

Wanda smiled. “And you’re… normal?”

“I am. All the powers I had with the Stone are gone. No phasing but I’m still me.”

A little laugh erupted from Wanda’s throat. “I’m glad you’re safe.” She faced Shuri. “Thank you.”

The Wakandan Princess smiled. “I did all I could.”

“And it worked,” added Tony. “It’s gone. Exactly what we needed to happen.”

Natasha approached him holding a clear plastic bag. “I’ve picked up the shards of the Stone.”

“If you excuse us, Princess, Wanda, Vision… Nat and I need to have a quick talk.” Tony led Natasha away, out of the lab and down the corridor. “One down, Nat.”
“I know. I can’t believe it has been this easy,” she replied. “I keep waiting for something to go wrong.” She held the packet up containing the shards of the Mind Stone.

Tony took it from her, opened it and poured the shards onto his palm. “Such small things but with the power of the universe… We could stop now… We’ve destroyed one. Thanos cannot collect them all now.”

“Maybe not but I’d still feel better if we got them all. We eliminate their threat for good.” Natasha looked at the shards sitting in Tony’s hands and then her eyes widened. “Tony? The fragments!”

His hand was hot, a slight tingle running up his fingers and as he directed his focus upon the shards of the Mind Stone, they seemed to melt into his hand. “What!” he yelped, shaking his hand but the few shards which had yet to sink into his palm did not fall off. “What the hell?”

His hand glowed yellow as the final pieces of shard melded into his skin and disappeared. No mark was left only a strange sensation running through his body and into his chest. “What?”

“If that isn’t a sign, Tony…”

“Don’t say it!” warned Tony. Inspecting the skin he found no sign anything out of the ordinary had happened. His arm was still slightly tingling but the sensations were slowly fading.

“There is more at work here, Tony, then we realise,” swallowed Natasha. She reached for his hand, running her fingers over the stretch of his skin which the shards had sunk into.

“Let’s just not say anything more about this,” swallowed Tony. He shook his hand. “The sooner we finish the rest of the Stones, the happier we’ll both be.”

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“Tony?” Pepper lay down beside him on the bed. “What is it? You’ve been quiet since you told me one of the Stones has been destroyed.”

Tony lay on his back looking up at the ceiling. “Just thinking about… stuff.”

 Isn’t it a bit dangerous you thinking about things?” noted Pepper, smiling gently, slightly teasing him. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Tony turned to face her, their noses barely apart. “I can’t keep on denying it, Pep.”

“Denying what?” Pepper sat up, looking down at him. “Tony, did something happen today?”

He nodded. “People keep telling me they think I’m powerful. The link Nat and I share? It’s complicated… The Infinity Stones, we both died… But when we came back, I think we brought them or aspects of them back with us. Nat has powers… She thinks I have them too… And what happened today, no matter how much I’ve denied it to her, I must have powers.”

Pepper leaned forward. “Having powers doesn’t change who you are, Tony.”

“But that’s the thing, Pep, I can’t use them and I don’t know why. I don’t want powers but if I have them why can’t I use them?” Tony sat up. “The shards of Stone melded with my skin, Pep, and it didn’t hurt. These powers what do they make me? Am I still human? Still me?”

Pepper reached out and stroked his cheek. “You are still Tony Stark. Still, the man I love. Still, the man I want to spend the rest of my life with.”
Tony’s eyes widened. “You… you want to?”

A smile tugged at Pepper’s lips. “Yes.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. “I’m with you to the end of the line.”

“You… You’re amazing.” Tony’s face was a picture. He couldn’t believe the dedication he had from Pepper.

“You’re all I have, Tony,” she whispered. “I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

He kissed her. “Does this mean we’re engaged?” he asked, surprised by the development.

“If you want us to be,” she smiled.

“None of my proposals are conventional, are they?” he laughed, pulling her in for another kiss.

“What did you do the first time?” she asked. “I mean, I’ve just proposed to you in a roundabout sort of way!”

Tony chuckled. “I don’t think you want to know how I proposed to you before. Let’s just say we weren’t alone… And there were a lot of other people there…” He remembered the Press Conference he’d organised to introduce Spider-Man as the next official member of the Avengers. Instead, the kid had decided to not take him up on the offer and Tony had improvised by proposing to Pepper in front of a sea of reporters. Granted, he had expected the kid to turn him down.

“Oh god, please don’t tell me it was a press conference!”

“Maybe?” admitted Tony, cringing slightly. “You did say yes though.”

Pepper shook her head in despair. “I must have been mad to say yes to that proposal.”

“You loved me!” he grinned. More sombrely, he added: “Thank you, Pepper, for staying.”

“I couldn’t ever leave you, Tony,” she repeated. “And yes, I will marry you.” She slid down onto her back as Tony peered down at her from above. “Now, where is my engagement ring?”

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Saturday 27th August 2016

En-route back to Avengers Facility

“Did Tony talk to you?” Natasha sat down beside Pepper as she looked over the contracts which had been signed by the Wakandan King and the Prince.

“He did,” said Pepper quietly. “He told me this morning you might come talking to me.”

Natasha winced. She didn’t want to go behind Tony’s back.

“He won’t be mad,” Pepper pointed out. “He knows you care.”

“He told you what happened after the Stone was destroyed?” Natasha whispered quietly.

Pepper nodded. “He’s uneasy about it. He’s scared.” She placed the contracts down on the empty chair beside her. “I know he doesn’t want to admit it to me but I know him too well not to know when he is scared.”
Natasha bowed her head. “He’s told you everything?”

“About you two, yes,” admitted Pepper. “You have powers, so does Tony. The fragments of the Stone sinking into his hand through his skin has him worried he isn’t human anymore. But I don’t care. He’s still Tony to me. And I will always love him.”

Natasha smiled, relieved. “He’s lucky to have you.”

“I know.” Pepper sighed. “These powers he has… He doesn’t want them, but he needs them, doesn’t he?”

Natasha nodded. “I think so. I know he has them. I can sense them. I’ve seen them in his soul. Our bond, the link we share, it is important. When they come out, and I know his powers will be unleashed one day, whether it’s soon or a few years from now, he’ll need us, the both of us to help him through it.” She paused, reflecting for a moment on what to say next.

Pepper bit her lower lip. “Do you have a theory where these powers come from? Tony implied they’re the Infinity Stones themselves.”

“I believe mine originate from the Soul Stone. It’s how I died. Tony used all six… If I have the powers of the Soul Stone, then Tony has the powers of the other five. And I’m not sure what they mean for him, but I know from having seen inside his soul, that the powers he has will be…” She paused trying to find the right word. “Magnificent. I think he’ll be the strongest of us all. Whatever brought us back must have done this to us for a reason. I get the feeling we were not just sent back to stop Thanos but for something more…” Natasha trailed off.

Pepper breathed slowly, accumulating the information. “Have you told Tony this?”

Natasha shook her head. “No.”

“Why tell me?”

“Out of anyone else here in this time, you know the true extent of what happened to us. Tony’s lucky he has someone he can talk to. I don’t. Not really. And I’ve been here a lot longer than he has. Two years longer. I’ve had a lot of time to think. I know Tony is terrified of losing you, of not being able to have the life he wants so badly. He’s already lost it once…” Natasha sighed and sat back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel worse…”

“You haven’t,” Pepper reassured her, reaching towards Natasha’s hand and holding it in her own. “No matter what happens I’m with you and Tony every step of the way, to the end of the line. Regardless of what happens in the future, if you are here for another reason beyond Thanos, I’ll find a way to stay not just by Tony’s side but with yours too. I can promise you, Nat.”

A slight smile tugged at Natasha’s lips. “Thank you, Pepper. It means a lot we have your support. I don’t know what Tony would do without you.”

Pepper laughed gently. “Be more of a walking disaster than he is now, I think.”

Natasha grinned. “You’re probably right about that.”

Pepper smiled knowingly, picked up the contracts beside her and continued to review them, whilst Natasha leaned back in her seat to rest for the remainder of the journey back home.

To be continued...
Illustration of Tony and Wanda shaking hands from Chapter 14: A Growing Friendship, illustrated by the talented JediPanda22!

Please check out their other illustrations on their Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/jedipanda22/

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

A lot going on in this chapter... One Infinity Stone destroyed, five more to go. Wanda now knows about Tony and Natasha. Her role in this story has now expanded, so expect to see a lot more of Wanda! Vision is now normal with no powers of his own. Without the Infinity Stone, he's just an android but he maintains who he is.

And, you may have picked up on the hints in this chapter, but there is a lot more going on with Tony and Nat than what they even realise themselves.

Up next: Peter deals with the Vulture whilst Tony is called as a witness to the trial of
Thaddeus Ross!

I hope to post next week but depending on how long this gets, I may not be able to!

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Seventeen: The Trial of Thaddeus Ross

Chapter Summary

Tony goes to court.

Chapter Notes

I’m going to be brutally honest... I do not like this chapter. I found it very difficult to write. As I am in the UK, I do not know much about the US justice system so if it doesn't feel right in terms of how the trial is presented, please tell me and I'll see if I can edit it. I wanted to get this out.

Some of you may be disappointed because I wanted to include Peter and the Vulture in this chapter but that event doesn’t work in this story, so it happens during the trial but off-screen, if that makes sense. I tried to think of ways to include it but with Tony tied up at Court it proved difficult and I chose to elect the easier option of only mentioning it briefly in this chapter. My apologies for that but Peter will show up in future chapters though it may not be for a while now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Trial of Thaddeus Ross

Thursday 29th September 2016

New Avengers Facility

“Tony? Can I talk to you?” Natasha slid into the seat opposite Tony and continued when he slightly nodded in acceptance of her question. “It’s been just over a month since the Mind Stone was destroyed. I know you’ve been busy…” Her eyes focused upon the piles of paperwork on Tony’s desk.

Tony glanced up, placing his pen down on the paper. “I want to continue our Infinity Stone hunt but a date has been set for Thaddeus Ross’s trial. Starts next Monday. I have to be there for it. He is intent on dragging this through the courts despite the fact he’s already ruined his reputation. He refuses to accept a plea bargain or plead guilty.” Tony leaned back in his chair frustrated. “Ross is claiming diminished responsibility through reason of insanity.”

“Seriously?” Natasha was shocked by Ross’ audacity to claim such a defence. “He has to know that defence will not work. He knew what he was doing when he tried to manipulate the Accords and murder you!”

Tony nodded slowly. “I know. But apparently he has obtained proof which shows he was out of his mind. But since we are contesting that claim it has to go to a trial.”
“When will his case be heard?” asked Natasha.

“Over the next few weeks,” replied Tony. “As much as I want to get the Time Stone sorted I need to deal with this first. But the good thing about this is if Thanos sticks to the time frame he did before – and there is nothing to suggest he won’t – then we do have time to rest. Time is the last one we can do on our own without outside help. The others are not on this planet and we need the Guardians for them.”

Natasha frowned. “I’m surprised Carol hasn’t returned yet with them.”

“I’m not,” replied Tony. “We didn’t exactly give her a timeframe, did we? She could have contacted Rocket and the others and they may have refused to come. She would have still held up her side of the bargain.”

Natasha sighed. “All true.” She leaned back in the chair. “You are happy to leave the Time Stone until after Ross’ trial is over?”

“I’d rather not but preparation for the trial is hard work. I’ll be on the stand giving evidence. Effectively I am the accuser. The fact it has gone to trial is ludicrous but because Ross refuses to admit his guilt, we have no choice. Pepper is livid.” Tony shuffled through the papers on his desk. “We’re using your written statements as evidence so you have no need to take a stand and testify. Same for anyone who was present on that day. Only Barnes is testifying against Ross in person.”

“Bet Steve will love that…”

“He didn’t,” shrugged Tony, “but he has been helping Barnes prepare. Plus, William Ginter Riva has agreed to testify against Ross. He’s taken a plea bargain on the condition his sentence is reduced if his evidence contributes to a successful conviction against Ross.”

“Wait,” frowned Natasha, “when I interrogated Riva myself before rescuing you, he said he didn’t know who was behind it, or anyone else who was involved.”

Tony smirked. “He lied. He knew. Because he was an accomplice to Ross’ crimes and he admitted his guilt, Riva is already serving his sentence.” Tony leaned back in his chair, clasping his fingers together. “But the sentence can be reduced and that is the only reason why he has agreed to testify against Ross.”

“How long was he given?”

Tony shrugged. “Twelve years. It will be reduced to six years if Ross is convicted. For Ross, Pepper is gunning for life with no hope of release.”

“Good. He deserves it,” Nat replied darkly. She caught his gaze. “Are you concerned the insanity excuse will hold up and he’ll be sentenced to a more lenient one?”

“There is always the chance of it happening,” admitted Tony, “however, loathe as I am to use it, I could utilise BARF to project the jury my memories and show them how perfectly sane Ross was when he was shooting me through with bullets.”

“Then why not use it in the first place?” she queried.

“Because BARF is not perfect. The memories can be manipulated to show what you had wished had happened. If I bring it into this court case, Ross could use it himself to demonstrate I’m lying too. What I have is a prototype. Using BARF could backfire against us.”
Natasha frowned. “Shame that. Could have been a useful way to demonstrate his guilt.”

Tony nodded, falling silent.

Natasha paused, scrutinising Tony. “Something else is bothering you, I can tell.”

“It’s… Peter.”

“Parker?”

“Yeah…” Tony trailed off, unsure of how to proceed.

“Is he alright?” probed Natasha, her eyes never leaving Tony’s, observing the minute movements in his facial expressions.

Tony cleared his throat. “He’s fine.”

“Then why are you worried?”

“Adrian Toomes.”

“Who?” Natasha hadn’t heard of him before.

“You were on the run last time this happened. I doubt this was something you or Steve knew about.”

“We did keep up with the news,” Natasha pointed out. “But… admittedly… it was world news mainly.”

“I thought so. Toomes wasn’t a large scale threat. I didn’t really deal with the situation that well. I tried to tell the kid to leave it alone. I’d already fed information to the FBI about Toomes’ movements. The kid got in the way; disrupting the legal process I was trying to use to apprehend Toomes. It did work out for the best in the end though. The kid bought him in. I’m torn on whether to stop him or let the kid deal with him. The difference this time is that I will be a better mentor for Peter… But it is around now the whole incident kicked off and I’ve got the trial to think about…”

“Do you want me to look out for him?” Natasha intervened. “I can do that.”

Tony shifted in his seat. “I can’t ask you to do that. He’s my responsibility.”

“Yet you have other responsibilities you need to see to first,” she pointed out. “Peter is a good kid. He dealt with it before; I think he can do so again. All he needs is your guidance and you are still in the position to fulfill that role.”

“Trouble is I could be wrapped up in the court for at least a month. The trial is a complicated one. It doesn’t just involve what Ross tried to do to me; it also involves the prosecution the US Government is bringing against him for his role in trying to take control of the Accords. I need to be there for all of it as I was heavily involved.” Tony sighed and sat back. “No, I think I need to step back. Peter has a suit. Some of its functions have been released to him, he knows how it works. No, I think I know what I can do for Peter. He hasn’t stumbled across the Vulture yet. He soon will. I’m going to record him a message. Keep a watch on him. There may be a time he will nearly drown. You need to send in FRIDAY with the suit to extract him with the message uploaded. That should give him enough information that may help him. Whatever I say will not stop him from continuing investigating but it may aid him from making pivotal mistakes.”
“I can do that. Monitor him for you. Changed your mind, Stark,” she grinned.

“Only because I needed to,” he admitted. He muddled the papers on his desk together, not caring if they were out of order. “The one good thing about this changed timeline is that I already accelerated the removal of everything from Stark Tower. Toomes targeted the plane there as it left, intercepted it and tried to steal everything on board. Peter stopped him. That incident cannot happen now. I’ve already made sure everything has been transferred here.”

“Potentially you’ve already given him an easy ride then?” she noted.

Tony shrugged. “Hopefully.” He rubbed a hand down his face. “Just… keep me informed.”

“I will,” she promised.

“And once Ross is sorted for good we can focus our attention on the Time Stone.”

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**Saturday 1st October 2016**

“How are the other Winter Soldiers coming along?” Natasha leaned back against the wall as she observed Bucky and Steve in the training area.

Bucky paused, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He’d been given leave to stay at the Avengers Facility in-between his sessions with the government officials. Simon and Charlotte had made the recommendation to their superiors only a few days before and Bucky had moved back to the Avengers Facility. Before the Siberia mission to retrieve the other Winter Soldiers, Bucky’s arm had been replaced by Tony though it was easy to remove, a requirement currently put in place as a condition for Bucky moving back to the Avengers Facility. He was only allowed to have it installed when he needed it, such as when he was training.

Bucky flexed his fingers on his arm. “They’re… recovering. Not taking it well. Unlike me, they were allowed to keep their minds and memories. I think if you’re looking to them to join the Avengers, it is unlikely. They are loyal to Hydra and remain so.”

“But if they are recovering…?” she asked, trailing off.

Steve shook his head. “They’re complicated. They were HYDRA before they accepted the modified serum. Their loyalties haven’t changed. They’ll have to go through an extensive rehabilitation programme before they’d be cleared for release.”

Natasha wilted.

“And they all hated me,” muttered Bucky quietly. “I was… superior to them… I knew no different. I didn’t realise I had another life. They knew I had no choice in becoming what I was. But they did. They loathed they received an inferior serum which made them insane. Killing them would have been mercy.”

“That isn’t something we would ever do, Buck,” replied Steve.

Bucky grimaced. “You have your work cut out for you. They were elite HYDRA operatives, loyal to the cause. I think rehabilitation in their case could be difficult to achieve.”

Natasha sighed. “So you’d say it was unlikely they’d be of use to the Avengers in the near future?”
Bucky inclined his head. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“Right.” Natasha had hoped but at the moment the other Winter Soldiers were not fit for duty. “Thanks. I just wanted to check since you’re more involved with them that I am. I’d better get going.”

Steve stepped forward. “Are you heading to Ross’ trial with Tony?”

She shook her head, her hair falling about her shoulders. “No. I’ve given my statement. Plus, if required, I have agreed to be interviewed by video link. But there is enough evidence presented which should convict Ross.”

“I’ll be heading there on Wednesday,” added Bucky quietly. “That is when I’ve been told the prosecution intends to call me forward to provide evidence. I’m not sure what help I can give.” He shrugged.

“I think you’ll give us more help than you believe you will,” smiled Natasha. “After his trial, Ross will not be able to hurt or use you again.”

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Monday 3rd October 2016

The court was in session.

Opening statements had been made and Tony was about to take the stand to present his own evidence. Aside from Pepper, he was the only member of the Avengers there. They had their written statements, all of which had been accepted by the court, and Natasha was on standby to submit video evidence if required. They were not expecting the defence to call many people forward due to the nature of the plea.

Ross was sitting under armguard, explicitly not looking at his accusers. In an attempt to fit the plea he was putting forward, Ross was dressed casually and his hair and beard were unkempt and he looked tired and weary.

Tony’s lawyer, James Hynes, stood in front of him. “For the record, please state your full name.”

“Anthony Edward Stark.” He could have made a quip but this wasn’t the situation to do it in, not for such a serious matter.

“Can you please explain to the court, in your own words, what happened on Wednesday 22nd June 2016?”

Tony nodded. “It was the day of the signing of the Accords in Vienna. I had already received a threat from the accused and I believed there was a possibility I would be attacked at the signing. I was prepared in advance for this and the Avengers were on alert for it. I was approached by a man named William Ginta Riva. I was shot in the back of the shoulder and there was an explosion at the same time which rendered me unconscious. I woke in a van being held by the Winter Soldier. I attempted to escape and failed and knocked unconscious again. I next awoke in a cold, small room where my arms were bound behind my back where the defendant ordered the Winter Soldier to face him. The defendant told me ‘I had ruined him’ because I’d gone behind his back on the Accords, involving the President and raising my concerns on the defendant’s actions. The defendant proceeded to shoot me in several places, intending on shooting me in the head before ordering the Winter Soldier to kill him and ensure both murders were committed by the Soldier
himself. Before he could shoot me in the kidney, Natasha Romanoff and Colonel James Rhodes arrived.”

“Can you say for definite Thaddeus Ross acted on his own accord and did not show any signs of psychiatric symptoms?” the lawyer continued.

“I can, yes. The defendant knew what he was doing and had elaborately planned this in advance, going so far as to send me a threatening note a few days before the Accords signing was to take place. It is my absolute certainty that the defendant was well and truly aware of his actions on the day of Wednesday 22\textsuperscript{nd} June 2016,” confirmed Tony, standing straight and keeping his story simple and straight and his voice neutral. He avoided eye contact with Ross.

“Would you say that, if it had not been for the swift actions of Natasha Romanoff and Colonel James Rhodes, you would not be here today to present evidence?”

“I would not be.” Ross had intended to kill him. That much was clear. To try to wiggle out of it angered Tony, enough so that he was happy to spend weeks here to prove Ross’ guilt and sanity.

“Was the Winter Soldier under the defendant’s control?”

“Yes.” Now they were onto Barnes which Tony had expected.

“He was not aware of his actions?”

Tony hesitated. “I cannot safely state for the record if Barnes was aware of what he was doing; only that he regrets injuring me whilst under the defendant’s control.” That was the truth. Barnes had told him he remembered but that wasn’t the same as being aware. The only one they could obtain that correct answer from was Barnes himself and he was due to testify in a few days once Tony had been cross-examined by the defence.

“At any point did you feel the defendant was acting out of character?”

Tony shook his head. “No. He was clear and concise and knew what he was doing.”

“You confirmed earlier the defendant sent you a note, what were the contents of this message?”

“Mark my words, Stark. I’ll get you for this,” Tony recited.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark. I have no further questions.” His lawyer said and sat down.

The judge called forth the lawyer for Ross who intended to cross-examine Tony. He was a bald man, an elderly fellow with a white beard and a sharp gaze from his ice-blue eyes. He clearly had a lot of experience and would probably know how to trip Tony up.

“Mr. Stark, what evidence do you have that proves my client was responsible for sending the note you received?”

“It is not a coincidence I was attacked a few weeks later during the Accords signing,” answered Tony.

“A few weeks? Earlier you said it was a few days. Which is it, Mr. Stark? A few weeks or a few days?”

Tony nearly swore. He should have been more careful with his words. “It was a few weeks. I received it on Monday 6\textsuperscript{th} June 2016.”
“Are you sure about that, Mr. Stark?”

“Absolutely.” Tony’s gaze hardened.

“The writing of the note is not my client’s handwriting. It could have been written by anyone. My client simply cannot be responsible for it. The note was not delivered by him. Anyone could have decided to threaten you.”

“I get threats on a regular basis but there is a difference between sending a threat and then acting upon it. This threat was carried out within weeks of it being sent. It was targeted at me. Ross admitted it to me when he was peppering me with bullets. He had nothing else left to lose. He knew his career was overdue to his conduct over the Accords and wanted to take me down with him. I will stand by that.” Tony had perhaps gone too far in his assertions here. But Ross couldn’t be allowed to simply get away with it. The note had come from him. “Whether he wrote the note or not is immaterial. It was still sent by him to me.”

“I believe it is in the firm interests of my client that the note is disregarded as evidence. There is no real proof which suggests he was involved, considering Mr. Stark has admitted he receives threats on a regular basis,” the defence attorney suggested to the Judge.

The Judge contemplated the motion for a few minutes and Tony waited, already knowing what the result would be. The note couldn’t be used for evidence without it specifically being proven it had been sent by Ross. They’d been unable to match the DNA to Ross specifically.

“Evidence A, the note sent to Mr. Stark cannot be used as evidence to support the prosecution,” the Judge ruled.

Thaddeus Ross smirked from his seat in the docks.

Tony wanted to swear but it would be futile to do so.

The defence attorney approached Tony again. “Are you aware my client has suffered depression in the past, Mr. Stark? And has been treated for mental health issues prior to joining the government? He suffered Post-traumatic-Stress following the Vietnam War.”

“No.” Tony hadn’t. Certain aspects of Ross’s past wouldn’t have been accessible to the public.

“Then you agree it is likely my client was not acting rationally during the time you were kidnapped?”

“I do not agree,” stated Tony. He was not going to allow them to take him down this road.

“Yet the established history is there. Why can you not believe my client was not acting rationally? You were responsible for his loss of a position he loved and had worked hard for. Is it no wonder his mental health issues resurfaced?” the lawyer pressed.

“I know first-hand what it is like to suffer from mental illness. I know how debilitating it can be. Thaddeus Ross did not exhibit any symptoms when I was his prisoner.”

The lawyer stepped forward, closer to Tony. “You’ve suffered from mental illness, Mr. Stark? Where is the evidence of this? Did you ever receive an official diagnosis?”

“No.” Tony grated out, already guessing where this line of questioning was going.

“If you do suffer from mental illness, how can we not rule out the possibility that you manipulated
my client into kidnapping you and shooting you?” asked the lawyer.

“Objection! This line of question goes against what we are here for. We are not here to question Mr. Stark’s mental health, rather question whether the defendant acted rationally or not!” James Hynes stood from his chair, raising the objection to the line of questioning that was not relevant to the trial.

“Agreed,” the Judge declared. “Please move on from this line of questioning.”

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. He’d never allowed his mental health to become public before but now he knew it would. He’d had no choice in the matter though.

“How can you be certain the Winter Soldier had not forced Ross to co-operate?”

What a stupid question. Tony wanted to roll his eyes but knew the fallacy in that one specific action. “The Winter Soldier exuded no emotion and carried out his orders with no objections. He was under Ross’ control.”

“And how does one control the Winter Soldier?” Ross’ lawyer pressed further.

Tony swallowed. Now they were in dangerous territory. He couldn’t deny the existence of the Red Book. “There is a book which allows one to bring forth the Winter Soldier, for him to take control of Barnes’s body and work to any command given to him.”

“And, if I am right in my assertions, you are in possession of this book?”

“I am.” Tony couldn’t lie, not while under oath.

“And there you go members of the jury. We have conclusive proof that Tony Stark had access to controlling the Winter Soldier. He admits he could control him. This calls into question the charges levelled against my client by Tony Stark. I would like the jury to consider the possibility that Tony Stark set up his own kidnapping with Barnes fully aware of what he was doing, in order to frame my client and force him to shoot Stark, in order to further discredit him.”

Tony seethed. This was Ross’ plan all along. How could the jury believe this?

“I have no more questions.” Ross’ lawyer joined his own table whilst Tony made his way back to his own.

“That was a disaster,” muttered Tony to James Hynes.

“No, it wasn’t,” replied Hynes, shuffling through the notes he had been making throughout the questioning. “They do not realise we have several credible witnesses. I suggest we call Barnes into court now, as well as Ginta Riva. I hadn’t wanted to use them until later on in the week but I believe we can repair the damage done today by bringing them forward today.”

“Barnes isn’t here though,” whispered Tony. “He’s still back at the Compound. He wasn’t expected to be called until Wednesday.”

“I know but as soon as I realised where the questioning was going, I put the call out to have him brought in.”

A hand landed on Tony’s shoulder. “It’ll be alright, Tony,” said Pepper. Her face was white but her eyes seethed with anger. “They will fail in taking you down. They cannot possibly know the other witnesses we can bring forward.”
Tony wasn’t so sure but he had to believe.

It had to be said William Ginter Riva’s appearance in the court and testifying against Ross did throw the defence team. William had been briefed well and he stuck to the points, insistent on Ross being his point of contact and ordering him to distract Tony so the Winter Soldier could shoot him as the bombs went off. The defence did bring him up on how he had lied before when interrogated originally and not knowing who he had worked for but Riva had provided evidence of the contact he’d had with Ross, thereby giving the prosecution another piece of item to introduce.

And then it was Barnes’s turn, escorted into court by armed guards. Steve sat at the back of the court watching the proceedings.

Barnes explained in his own words what had happened to him, how Ross had found him in Romania and had taken control of him with the Red Book, how he only remembered after waking up from the Soldier’s control what Ross had ordered him to do, how he had nearly ended the Stark line for good. And he expressed his regret and his hatred for the Red Book which controlled him.

Ultimately Barnes’ testimony was enough to convince the Jury that Ross had been acting sanely and with the purpose to get revenge on Tony Stark for stepping in and ensuring a fairer version of the Accords was drafted in, and for highlighting the concerns the Avengers had made regarding Ross’ involvement in the Accords.

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**Tuesday 11th October 2016**

Following the first day of evidence, on the second day, it was Thaddeus Ross’ turn to take the stand and to be questioned by his own lawyer and then the prosecution. Ross stood up well in court and Tony couldn’t decide whether Ross had been successful in maintaining the illusion his decision making had been impaired when he’d kidnapped and attempted to murder him.

Over the following days, the rest of the Avenger’s statements were read out in court, submitted as evidence and then the prosecution presented the injuries Tony had received as further evidence. They had been calculated bullet wounds, chosen to cause maximum damage. Tony hadn’t wanted his injuries to be revealed but because of the nature of the case, the Jury had the right to examine the images put forth.

Thankfully it was a closed court, though reporters waited outside every day, wanting to report on the trial every evening. Neither Tony nor Pepper made any statements, though Ross’s lawyer did, in the hope of turning public favour his way.

It was late one night into the second week of the trial, once Tony and Pepper had returned to the hotel that Tony received a phone call from Natasha.

“How are things going?” he asked, answering the call.

“Good. I hear the trial is… interesting?”

“You could say that,” he answered. “But you didn’t call to discuss with me the trial, did you?”

“No,” she replied. “I wanted to let you know that Peter Parker apprehended Adrian Toomes earlier this evening.”
Tony’s eyes widened. “He did?”

“He did. Surprised me when he called to tell me. Apparently Toomes had been trying to get into the old Avengers Tower.”

Tony laughed. “Oh, he fell for the misinformation then. Good.”

“That was you?” Natasha asked. “Toomes said he had received intelligence valuable equipment had been left behind in Avengers Tower.”

“Yeah… I set this up before the trial. I didn’t want to really say in case Toomes didn’t fall for it but he did. I sent Peter a coded message for him to work out where Toomes was likely to strike next,” admitted Tony. “I was trying to assist him without making it too easy. He wasn’t injured?”

“Just a few bruises. Nothing he can’t handle. Toomes did attempt to blow a few floors up in an attempt to escape but it backfired on him, resulting in Peter being able to apprehend him.”

“Good.” Tony was relieved. He’d been worried about Peter handling the Vulture without him around to give aid but the kid had handled it well judging by Natasha’s report. “Guess that’ll be another court case I’ll be overseeing then with Toomes; stealing my property and attempted murder of a minor.”

“You’re making a habit of this, Stark,” joked Natasha. “Why don’t we just bite the bullet and issue a court summons to Thanos whilst we’re at?”

Tony laughed out loud. “Imagine that? Serving court papers to Thanos for crimes he has yet to commit!”

“I don’t think it would go well,” she reasoned in return, chuckling down the line.

“I think he’d raze the Earth in response. Let’s try to avoid that this time.”

“We will, Tony. How long do you think the trial will last for?” she asked.

Tony sighed. He knew it would be a long one. “The rest of this week is still to do with his attempted murder of me… but starting next week it is his obstruction of the Accords. I think I’ll be here until November. And then they’ll have to go away and deliberate the result. We won’t be getting anything done until the New Year at the earliest now. Unless Ross suddenly declares he is guilty and we can skip the rest of the process but he won’t.”

“You want to leave the Time Stone until next year?” Natasha was surprised by the admission.

“I don’t think we have a choice, Nat. I’ll be tied up here until at least mid-November and then we need to do research on Strange to see if he is around where we think he might be. We need to be sure. We cannot just walk in and demand the Stone. We need to plan this one carefully and thoroughly before attempting anything. If we have to wait until after Christmas then we have no choice,” admitted Tony. He didn’t like the idea of leaving the Time Stone until next year but he had a lot on that needed to be sorted before he could even begin thinking about sorting the Time Stone. “Thanos doesn’t arrive until April 2018. We still have sixteen months to get the rest of them. I think delaying is our only option at the moment.”

“Ok.” It was clear Natasha wasn’t fond of the idea but she could understand why. “I’ll see you when I see you. In the meantime, I’m going to try to get some intelligence on our friend, Strange, just to see if we can accelerate this along faster if we can.”
“Fine by me. If we can get the Time Stone sorted before Christmas…” Tony trailed off.

“We’d only have four to go after next year,” finished Natasha.

Tony wetted his lips. The advantages were there. It was just a question of whether they’d be able to achieve it. “Good plan.”

“Tony?” Her voice lowered over the phone.

“Yeah?”

“Take care of yourself.” Natasha cared, she really did.

“I will.”

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**Friday 18th November 2016**

All the evidence for the charges levelled against Thaddeus Ross had been presented by Friday 4th November but the Jury took two weeks before they were able to issue a verdict.

“Can the accused, Thaddeus Ross, please stand for the verdict?” the Judge decreed.

Tony watched anxiously as Thaddeus stood from his chair.

“Does the Jury find Thaddeus Ross guilty or not guilty in relation to the charges of kidnap and attempted murder of Anthony Edward Stark?” the Judge asked.

A woman with thick blonde hair and bright green eyes stood from the Jury holding a piece of paper in her thin hands. “The Jury finds the defendant guilty.”

Relief swept through Tony. He had hoped Ross’ defence of insanity wouldn’t hold up.

“Does the Jury find Thaddeus Ross guilty or not guilty to the charges of contempt of the Accords and the US government?”

“The Jury finds the defendant guilty.”

“Does the Jury accept the defendant’s plea of mental instability for his actions?” the Judge asked.

“The Jury does not,” the woman said.

Tony breathed out a sigh of relief. The Jury had not believed Ross.

“The prisoner will be taken to a secure facility where he will be kept in isolation for the foreseeable future. The full length of his sentence will be determined at a later date. However, it is the court’s recommendation that he be detained indefinitely. The defendant has no right to appeal.”

Tony wanted to laugh but didn’t. He knew it wouldn’t look good if he did so.

Now the trial was over he could focus his attention upon his other task: obtaining and destroying the Time Stone.

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

Well, the last part of the Thaddeus Ross arc has been posted. He's done, finite, finished. Thankfully! I was originally going to show more of his trial in detail but it was getting so long I realised I'd just keep on repeating myself so I elected to show as little as possible but still keep it interesting.

From now on, we'll be concentrating on the main storyline which is, of course, the Infinity Stones!

And to whet your appetite for future chapters... Thanos shall arrive personally in the fic in 7 chapters time! From now on, Tony and Nat will be on the Infinity Stone hunt. If I keep my weekly update schedule, the next three chapters will cover The Time Stone, The arrival of the Guardians of the Galaxy and just before the year is up, the Reality Stone!

The next chapter will be posted next Sunday. I am working the late shift next Sunday so I may post early UK Sunday time or late Sunday night UK time.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Eighteen: The Time Stone

Chapter Summary

Tony, Natasha and Wanda meet Doctor Strange...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

A shorter chapter this week, especially after last week's mammoth chapter! The next few chapters may be shorter but as we move closer to the next part of the story, the chapters will begin to lengthen again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Time Stone

Saturday 4th February 2017

177A Bleecker Street

New York Sanctum

They had not expected to wait so long before they made a move for the Time Stone. From staking out the New York Sanctum, Natasha had learned Stephen Strange had not yet appeared as the Sorcerer Supreme. In the last week intelligence had filtered through from Natasha that Strange had now appeared there.

Their plans to obtain the Time Stone before Christmas had not gone ahead. Neither of them had wanted to face the other bearer of the Time Stone. Tony had informed Natasha that when Bruce had gone to New York to obtain it for them originally, he had not encountered Strange, rather a woman. Considering they were going to be overlapping with Strange, both Tony and Natasha had agreed to wait for him to appear and then try to recruit him to the Avengers at the same time as retrieving the Time Stone.

Since Thaddeus Ross’s trial and the lack of movement on pursuing Infinity Stones, Tony and Pepper had spent the majority of December and January planning their wedding. They wanted to keep it small and had set a date for February 2018. Despite it not being the original date they’d married before, Tony didn’t care. He just wanted to marry her, have her as his wife, even if it was for a short time before Thanos was due to arrive and reign down hell upon them all.

They stood on the corner of Bleecker Street.

“Are you sure approaching them is wise?” Natasha whispered quietly.
“We have no choice,” said Tony. “We need that Time Stone.” He glanced over his shoulder at Wanda. He’d brought her along with them because if they were able to retrieve the Stone, he’d rather destroy it here rather than elsewhere. “I don’t want to risk leaving this one until last. We’re still waiting on Danvers to return before we can even consider the ones on other worlds.”

“I hope she returns soon,” noted Natasha quietly, her eyes focused upon the building situated just down the road from where they were standing.

“Me too,” replied Tony. He was getting anxious at the lack of contact from Carol Danvers. He was considering getting Nick Fury to send the signal to her again, in the hope it might entice her to return. It was possible she was having trouble locating the Guardians of the Galaxy but they couldn’t rule out the possibility she had made contact and they simply just hadn’t arrived at Earth yet. They hadn’t expressively informed Danvers to let them know the outcome.

Eyes focused upon the front door of the Sanctum, Tony began to walk up the path, keeping his head down. He was wearing inconspicuous clothing, a tracksuit with a hat and sunglasses. It was a disguise which had worked well over the years and continued to do so. His arc reactor was hidden underneath his jacket.

Natasha wore jeans and a hoody, and she too wore sunglasses. Her red hair was tied back. Wanda had adopted a similar style though her hair was splayed around her shoulders instead.

Reaching the door to 177A Bleecker Street, Tony raised his fist to prepare to knock when the door opened of its own accord.

Slightly weary, he glanced back at Natasha. “Someone knows we’re here…”

Pushing it open, Tony stepped inside into a wide entrance hall. The stairs sat in the centre of the wide room, curving round up to the first floor. The walls were decorated with old paintings and ornaments were scattered around the room. It was musky and old.

“Hello?” Tony called out, not really expecting an answer.

Wanda closed the door behind her and lifted the hood off her head. “This place…” she whispered. “There’s… magic here. I can sense it.”

Tony could feel it too. His skin was tingling. It was a sensation he had never picked up before when he had visited the place originally. He didn’t want to consider the implications of that thought. Tony stepped further, casting his eyes around, looking for any sign of movement.

He looked in one corner and then turned his head to look elsewhere, only to whip his head back when Wanda gasped. Doctor Strange was now standing where he had last looked. Strange was standing in the corner, his arms folded over his chest, scrutinising them as they stood in the entrance hall.

“I was not expecting guests,” the wizard commented.

Tony swallowed. “We need to talk to you.” He roamed his eyes downward and saw the necklace that Strange had worn before was not there. Where was the Time Stone?

“What about what?” Strange drifted forward.

Natasha answered with her voice low but filled with emotion: “Something is coming. We’re trying to stop it but we need your help. We need the Time Stone.”
Strange led them to a study where there was a sofa aligning the wall. He stood in front of them, keeping his composure as he considered them all. Natasha’s proclamation had made him weary but he had agreed to talk to them. He disappeared for a while, presumably to collect the Time Stone as he arrived in the room a short while later with it hanging around his neck.

“How do you know about this?”

“Circumstances,” answered Natasha cryptically. “We have reasons for seeking it out.” They’d agreed to inform Strange as much as they possibly could without giving away what would happen if Thanos collected all the Stones. “We know there are six of them, something you are aware of yourself. We know they are all exceptionally powerfully, which have been in the universe since the very beginning, perhaps from the very point of creation itself, maybe even from before that.” She paused to collect her words together. “There is a threat coming who wants to collect all the Stones. He will do everything in his power to make sure he retrieves them all, and if he succeeds… its game over for all of us. We need to stop him and the only way of doing so is to destroy them before he gets here.”

“The Stones are required to keep the universe balanced,” Strange stated. “To destroy them is to destabilise the universe. You risk ripping the universe apart.”

“Charming,” commented Tony. “If it helps, I do not think destroying them is really ridding the universe of the Stones themselves.”

Natasha threw him a suspicious glance. What was he implying?

“A power that ancient surely cannot be easily destroyed?” Tony theorised, hands behind his back, swinging back and forth. “If they are the building blocks of the universe surely aspects of them must continue to exist even if their shells are destroyed? Destroyed and scattered makes it harder for someone to use their power unwisely, surely?”

Natasha wasn’t sure what he was implying but she could guess. The Mind Stone remnants had sunk into Tony’s hand. What if they didn’t need to destroy them? But if Tony suspected it, why was Wanda here? There was no guarantee that she was needed for the other Stones. She may have only had the power to destroy the Mind Stone.

“That may be so, Stark, however it is not something I am willing to risk on a theory,” stated Strange. “I cannot risk the universe.”

“You won’t be,” replied Tony.

“Tony…” Natasha felt wary of what Tony was saying. Wanda was watching him carefully.

“I was told to watch out for you,” explained Strange. “‘Watch out for Tony Stark’, she said. ‘He would come for it’. She never told me what she meant. Now I see it was for the Time Stone.”

“Who is ‘she’?” asked Tony, glancing at Natasha.

“The Ancient One. She passed away not that long ago. I am the Sorcerer Supreme now. She had the ability to see the future, past her own death, a very rare gift among the Sorcerers.”

“Did she tell you anything else?” Tony’s mouth was dry.

“No.” Strange held up the Time Stone. “Only to watch out for you. Curious wording. Am I meant
to stop you from what you are doing or to help you? Which is it, Stark?”

Tony swallowed.

Natasha could see he was unnerved by the conversation but he was attempting to keep his cool, to show he was not a threat.

“I’m here to help, not to single-handedly destroy the universe,” replied Tony carefully.

“Yet you want to destroy it,” stated Strange, “by taking the Stones. Perhaps they were Stones for a reason. Perhaps it is the only way their powers can be contained.”

Natasha paused, her mind whirling at Strange’s words. No. They are still contained. The Mind Stone isn’t gone. It’s just in Tony…

What if their mission wasn’t to destroy the Stones but to become the Stones?

“I do not think there is anything I can say which would convince you otherwise,” continued Tony. “But I know something which might.”

“What?” Strange looked vaguely curious.

“Use it.” Tony pointed out. “Use the Time Stone to see the outcomes of the coming conflict. Something is coming. We still have time to prevent the outcome we know is at the end of the road but we need your co-operation. The only way to do that…” He trailed off, his eyes focused on the Wizard in front of him.

“He let me into his mind,” spoke up Wanda, having stayed silent all this time. “I saw things I wouldn’t believe but I know to be true. They need this Stone. It will help save us all.”

Strange cast his gaze between them. “Wait here.”

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Strange returned fifteen minutes later with another man in tow. A man Tony knew to be Wong, Strange’s friend and who had protected the Sanctum during Strange’s absence during the five years of hell following the Decimation.

“After discussion with my good associate, Wong, I will use the Time Stone to view the future. However, Wong is here to protect me if either of you decide to harm me or take the Stone.” Strange’s voice was hard and his face resolved over what he needed to do.

“We won’t harm you,” said Tony. “None of us are like that.”

Strange turned and sat on the floor, his legs crossed over. The Time Stone floated in front of him, glowing slightly green as tendrils appeared around Strange’s body. The Wizard’s eyes closed and they watched as Strange started to seep deep into the mysteries of the future.

“Will this work?” whispered Natasha in Tony’s ear.

“I hope so. When he did this before we were already set on the path to only one way of winning… I’m hoping this time there, with it being so far in advance, we may have a chance of more,” replied Tony, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

Wong kept a watch on them whilst keeping an eye out on his friend.

After a while Strange’s body began to shake and rose from the floor, hovering just a metre above
the floor, and his head began to move faster as he looked in different directions, potentially indicating that he was looking into lots of different futures.

“Is he alright?” whispered Wanda, holding her hand up to her mouth in horror as they observed Strange’s actions becoming faster and faster.

And then Strange came out of his trance, his voice rising as his eyes opened and a small scream erupted from his throat.

Tony flinched, not wanting to know the outcome of what he had seen and why it had caused Strange such a distress. He paced forward as Wong did the same, reaching Strange at the same time. Kneeling down, he placed a hand on the Wizard’s shoulder.

“Hey, you alright?” Tony asked quietly.

Strange looked stress, his normally perfect hair was now messier then usual and he was panting heavily as he fought to regain his composure. “I’m… fine.”

Tony wasn’t too sure on Strange’s assertion but decided not to question him further. He wouldn’t get answers if he pushed for them: he’d learnt that before.

“You saw the future?” Natasha asked quietly.

“I saw many outcomes of the coming conflict… All of them ended in failure save for one.”

Tony didn’t know how to react. There was still only one way to win? Surely they’d have more?

“You’re already on the path of one way, Stark,” said Strange quietly. “And, now I know what I must do.” He pushed himself to his feet, wiping dirt from his clothes as he got to his feet. He levitated the Time Stone towards Tony. “Take it.”

Surprise flashed across Tony’s face. He was surprised Strange was just giving it to them with no question asked but he had seen the future. Tony didn’t want to take it, not with his bare hands anyway. He glanced at Nat. “Do you have a cloth I can use?”

Understanding his hesitation in not wanting to take it in front of an audience, Natasha stepped forwards with a stray bit of tissue from her pockets and Strange levitated the Stone into her hand. Wrapping it up tightly, she passed the Stone to Tony who took it safely in his hands and tucked it into his inner pocket of his jacket.

“I’m surprised you just gave it to me,” stated Tony.

Strange still looked a bit shaken. Whatever it was, he was not going to elaborate. “You only have one shot of this, Stark.”

“Right…” Tony swallowed. He wasn’t sure what to think. “Erm… well… thanks.”

He wasn’t sure if they should leave or not but they’d retrieved what they came for and the three of them quietly left the Sanctum.

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**Avengers Facility**

“You didn’t really need me,” mused Wanda. “Why did you ask me to come?”
Tony unwrapped the Time Stone and set it upon the table in his lab. “I was going to ask you to destroy it there but… I think we need to do it here. The less people who know what we are up to the better.” He was careful not to touch the glowing green gem. He stepped back. “FRIDAY?”

“Yes boss?”

“Please secure all doors into the lab,” ordered Tony.

“Done.”

Locks clicked and sliding doors slid across and the few windows into Tony’s lab were shadowed over.

Tony stepped back, nodding to Wanda.

“You believe I can do it?” she asked.

“Honestly, I’m not sure, but it doesn’t matter if you can’t. You’re still incredibly powerful if you cannot.” He wanted to believe but a part of him did wonder if they really needed to destroy the casings but he had a theory he wanted to try out.

Tony grabbed Natasha’s hand and pulled her back.

“You don’t think she’ll destroy it, do you?” she asked quietly.

Tony didn’t answer. He didn’t want to face the reality he was supposed to absorb them. The nagging feeling in his chest only pumped harder. He was denying it.

Wanda positioned herself in front of the table, arms raised and she focused her power upon the Time Stone. Red strands of power echoed from her fingers and as she poured more energy into them, the strands increased in size until they were close to the Time Stone. But as they reached out to brush it aside, there was a white flash, a scream and silence.

Tony had covered his eyes at the flash and as he lowered his arms, he saw Wanda lying sprawled on the floor. She was groaning in pain. “Wanda!” He ran forward, ignoring the fact that the Time Stone was still intact on the table. He slid to his knees and gently turned her head to face his.

“Wanda?”

She blinked several times before she focused upon Tony. “That… hurt.”

“Do you want to sit up?” asked Tony.

Natasha was at her other side and at Wanda’s nod, Tony helped lift Wanda into a sitting position. She rubbed the back of her head.

“I don’t… think… I can… destroy it.”

Tony’s lips twitched. “The Mind Stone must have been the exception.” It had been a theory he had already assumed but he’d hoped Wanda would have been able to destroy them regardless. He sighed. “Don’t worry about it.” He looked down at his hands. “Guess there is only one thing to do.”

Wanda looked at him with wide eyes. “What do you intend to do if you can’t destroy it?”

“I don’t think we really needed to destroy the Mind Stone,” said Tony quietly. “I picked up the fragments of it after it was destroyed and I absorbed them…” Other than Natasha and Pepper,
Wanda was the first to know this new development.

“Your power…” whispered Wanda in awe. “You think I could only destroy the Mind Stone because my power originated from it?”

“I do,” confirmed Tony. “In the end, considering I absorbed the fragments, I don’t think we needed to destroy them.” He walked towards the table, his shoulders slumped, not sure if he was ready to face the reality which awaited him if he succeeded in absorbing the Time Stone.

“Tony… I know it scares you,” said Natasha quietly, “but we’re on this path for a reason. We cannot ignore what we’ve been given or these powers we have.”

“I know,” he answered quietly. “I guess I have to face it sometime, right?” He had to accept it.

Natasha drew Wanda back as Tony reached out and gently picked up the Time Stone. He placed it on his palm.

And then the Stone began to *sink* into his palm, and his hand glowed green as it melted through his skin and leaving no mark behind, save for the slight tingling sensation he had experienced when the fragments of the Mind Stone had been absorbed. He felt warmth in his chest. For a brief second he heard the ticking of time in his ears before it fell silent and his whole body glowed briefly green.

He let his hand hang loose at his side. “It’s done.”

Wanda moved forward reaching for Tony’s hand, her fingers running over the skin where the Stone had sunk in. She reached up to place a hand on his chest but then paused. “Can I?”

He nodded.

She placed a hand upon his chest and closed her eyes. “Power. I feel it. The chains are loosening.”

Tony paled. “What do you mean?” He could guess but he’d rather here it verbally.

“Your powers are tied together,” said Wanda.

“She’s right,” confirmed Natasha. “I sensed it myself too.”

“But what ties them together is loosening,” finished Wanda, removing her hand from Tony’s chest and stepping back.

It was obvious what Tony now needed to do, where this was going. “That means for me to use my powers I have to absorb every Infinity Stone.”

“At least it makes things simpler,” smiled Natasha. “You just need to touch it. No need for us to destroy them, is there?”

Tony could only agree. “No, there isn’t.”

**To be continued...**
Please let me know what you think!

I looked at the Marvel Cinematic Universe wiki and it does have a preliminary dating system for when events in the MCU take place. Apparently the finale of Doctor Strange took place in January 2017 which is why this story has jumped ahead a few months. I didn't want Tony and Nat to meet the Ancient One, only Strange and Wong, so the small time jump had to be done.

So, a few developments in this chapter. Strange looked into the future but what did he see? What awaits Tony and Natasha? Why can Tony absorb the Stones? What will happen when he has all six? That's if he gets all six before Thanos arrives... *evil laugh*

I hope to post the next chapter next Sunday though it could be a day early or a day later as we may visit family on Sunday. It isn't confirmed yet though. Next week we will see the arrival of the Guardians of the Galaxy!

Until next time,
the-writer1988
The alert of an unauthorised space ship entering the upper atmosphere sent the Accords Committee into a state of panic. Tony had been in a video conference call meeting with the committee when the alert had been sounded which enabled him to act quickly as he had suspicions on what the spaceship was and who it belonged to.

It had taken them long enough to arrive here.

With permission from the Committee to act, Tony instructed FRIDAY to open a broadcast signal which would allow him to send a message to the new arrivals. He intended to bring them down to Avenger’s Facility at the best possible moment. However, coming down in broad daylight might cause panic and concern and he’d rather avoid the implications of that scenario.

Tony was clad in his Iron Man armour, hovering just below the oxygen layer of the planet. His suit was designed to allow him to breathe further out in space. He could deploy weapons in space if the spaceship proved to be hostile but he doubted it would be. He recognised the ship.

He spoke into his receiver, communicating with Natasha and Steve at the Avengers Compound. “They’ll be in range shortly.” He intended to send a message to them once they were in range. He had to do this properly. With the Accords in place he had to follow the legislation, especially since he was part of the Committee.

“What will you do if they are hostile?” asked Steve over the communications unit.

“Threaten them,” stated Tony in reply. “But they won’t be hostile.”

“You can’t know that,” said Steve.
“If they are who I think they are, they’re allies,” grimaced Tony, knowing it was likely now his and Natasha’s secret was unlikely to stay hidden much longer.

Natasha’s voice echoed over his earpiece. “*Trust him, Steve. There is a lot you are unaware of.*”

“I’ve noticed you two have been working together a lot. Are you finally going to come clean?”

Tony swallowed. They hadn’t been as secret as they thought but more people were finding out. Perhaps they were destined to do so. He sighed. “Now isn’t the time, Steve. We do have a spaceship heading towards us.”

“Allies, according to you.” There was a hint of sarcasm in Steve’s voice.

“They will be,” grated Tony.

“Steve now isn’t the time,” Natasha butted in, sounding agitated. “*We’ll discuss it later.*”

Tony rolled his eyes. Steve could be so frustrating sometimes. “They’re in range now. Transmitting communication message. *This is Tony Stark representing Planet Earth, calling unidentified ship. Please respond.*”

There was a pause after he finished his message before he got a response. A female voice answered one he hadn’t heard before when he’d met the Guardians before but he could guess who it belonged to.

“You wanted to speak to us, Tony Stark?”

“I did,” he answered. He knew the female speaking was Gamora. He didn’t recognise her voice but she had to be Gamora. She was the woman whose death had enraged Quill, ruining their plan to obtain the Gauntlet from Thanos.

“Why?”

“This isn’t the place to discuss it,” explained Tony. “I need you to land on Earth… I’ll vouch for you. It’s imperative we work together.”

“We’ve come because we want to know how you have knowledge of us, considering your planet is not advanced enough to travel into space yet.”

Tony grinned. “Earth has had its fair share of alien attacks over the years. If they have knowledge of us, it only seems fitting we would have knowledge of other things, doesn’t it?”

“Possibly, Mr. Stark,” returned the female voice. “Where do you want us to land?”

“I’ll transmit the coordinates for you but wait until darkness. It’ll be easier to disguise your arrival if you wait.” He tapped his fingers over the keyboard, sending the codes across.

“Received and acknowledged,” a male voice confirmed.

Tony was tempted to say the man’s name but he was sure that would freak him out. He didn’t want them to become hostile if they knew how much he knew. His knowledge was dangerous. “See you soon then.” He switched the frequency back to the Avengers Compound. “I’m coming back. Don’t say it, Steve. I know you heard the conversation. I’ll explain when I get back.”

Steve didn’t respond though he suspected it was because Natasha was glaring at him.
“Let’s go home,” muttered Tony quietly, disengaging his thrusters and descended back towards the Facility.

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When Tony arrived in his lab, Steve was waiting for him. Natasha stood off to the side, looking a bit wary. Raising his hands, Tony pre-empted anything Steve was about to say, “We all have secrets, Steve, and there are some things that do not concern you.”

“I think it concerns me when you already know who these people are and they know you!” retorted Steve.

“It’s… complicated.” Because it was. He just didn’t have the time now to fully explain it. “Look, Nat and I have been working together for a reason. A reason I’m sure you’ll find hard to believe.”

“I slept for seventy years and woke up with everyone I knew already gone. I’ve seen other life exist out there. How can anything you say surprise me, Stark?”

“Oh, we’re back to surnames now are we?” accused Tony. Steve could be so stubborn sometimes.

“I’m not going to call you anything else am I, Stark, when I don’t even know who the real –” Steve argued back, his hands balling into fists.

But Natasha stepped forward between them, hands raised. “We’re from the future, Steve.”

That shut Steve up straight away.

Tony glanced at Natasha. It was always going to happen, one way or another that Steve would find out the truth. He hadn’t wanted it to be so soon though. He’d rather have kept their secret for longer but with so many people being in positions to know, soon the whole group would be aware of Tony and Natasha’s secret. He wondered if it was worth it just telling them all. But could he trust them all? Heck, neither Rhodey or Happy had been informed. Only Pepper…

Steve shook his head. “Excuse me? The future? Come on, you really expect me to believe that?”

Tony shrugged. “It’s the truth. Pepper, Fury, and Wanda all know. We’ve been trying to keep it quiet, attempting to prevent something bad from happening.”

“Did you lose before?” Steve asked.

“You’re taking this rather well,” noted Natasha, her voice wary. “Tony and I survived what we’re trying to stop but it took so many other lives. Including some of our team members. We’re bringing in people who could be vital to our success this time. But you’ve been suspicious of us for a while, haven’t you?”

Steve moved away. “I have. You seemed to know everything that could possibly go wrong. Lagos… That was my first clue but I let it slide… But you two kept sneaking off for meetings, spending more time with one another. The Accords. You worked together on the Accords. Presented them to us as a team… And Ross. You found Tony pretty quickly after he was taken.”

He fixed his eyes upon Natasha. “If you’re really from the future…”

“Time travel is possible,” replied Tony quietly. “We came back. And we’ve been changing things so all those people who lost their lives do not lose them this time. When we came back… things changed between Nat and I. Somehow we can find each other… We’re not entirely sure why. But Nat found me because of that connection. We’re not going to hide it anymore.”
Steve sunk down into a chair. “It’s hard to believe.”

Tony shrugged. “It is the truth, the simplest one. Bringing the Guardians in is just one of the first steps we have been taking to ensure we are successful.”

Natasha reached out for Steve’s hand. He let her take it her smaller palm. “Steve, you have to trust us. What we’re doing, what we’ve been doing is to save everyone, not just on the Earth, but in the universe. If we are to succeed, you have to trust us.”

Steve pointed to the ceiling. “What is coming?”

Steve didn’t mean the Guardians. He meant the threat Natasha and Tony were trying to stop.

“He’s called Thanos,” answered Tony. “He was behind the invasion of New York. Loki was just a tool to carry out his wishes. Remember what Thor told us before he left Earth about the Infinity Stones?”

Steve remembered. “They’ve been showing up.”

“Haven’t you noticed Vision’s stone is gone?” asked Natasha.

“I had…” Steve frowned. “Vision said he found a way to have it safely removed and he was storing it elsewhere.”

“And you believed it?” Tony felt surprised Steve hadn’t questioned about the missing stone.

“I knew something was up. He told me you and Nat had it all under control.”

“Great…” Tony sighed. “Thanos is after the Infinity Stones. Nat and I are attempting to destroy them before Thanos gets them. With all of them together he can destroy the whole universe with a click of his fingers. We’ve destroyed two. The rest are located on other planets which is why we are bringing the Guardians in to assist us. We need to leave Earth if we’re going to get them all before Thanos does.”

Steve’s face hardened. “Count me in.”

“What?” Tony stepped back in surprise. “You want to come with us?”

“You’ll need me. And if I am to trust you, I need to follow your lead, right?” Folding his arms over his chest, Steve watched the two with interest.

“He’s right, we do need him, Tony,” interjected Natasha. “It can’t be just us going. Even if we do go with the Guardians, we might need others with us. They need to be prepared and the best way to do it is to follow us.”

“We cannot leave Earth undefended,” pointed out Tony. “If Steve comes with us…”

“There are others,” reminded Steve. “Tony, it isn’t just you defending the Earth. There are others too. And if this is a threat that won before, you need as much help as you can get.”

“Okay, fine,” agreed Tony. “You can come.”

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In the middle of the night, a select group of the Avengers sat around the Conference table in a room safely secured underground with the Guardians of the Galaxy on one side of the table and a few
members of the Avengers on the other. The Accords Committee had been informed of Tony’s decision for them to land. He’d explained his reasoning and that they had come with information relevant to a wider threat affecting the entire universe, though that was a falsehood on Tony’s part. He didn’t want the Committee finding out he had sent someone to ask for them to come.

Tony had asked, in addition to Natasha and Steve, for Wanda, Pepper and Fury to be there. None of the other Avengers were aware of the truth and didn’t necessarily have to be in the room for this discussion. He did resolve to speak to Rhodey and Happy at some point and bring them into the fold.

Tony sat in the centre with Natasha to the right and Pepper to his left. Steve sat beside Natasha and Wanda next to Steve, with Fury on Pepper’s left.

On the opposite side of the table sat the motley crew of the Benatar. Peter Quill faced Tony; his watchful eyes alight with suspicion, arms folded across his chest, straining the brown jacket he wore. To his right sat a green-skinned woman who had been introduced to them as Gamora. Then there was Mantis and a talking tree called Groot. Tony hadn’t met Groot before as he’d been killed by Thanos’ snap originally. In fact, Groot and Gamora were the only Guardian’s Tony had not met before. Rocket positioned himself on Quill’s left followed by Drax.

“Welcome to Earth,” began Tony. “I requested an ally of ours to find you and ask you to come here. We have much to discuss.”

“Interesting how an Earth-man could have knowledge of us,” stated Quill. “You’re out of range of anything going on in the wider galaxy.”

“It doesn’t mean we do not have our resources,” replied Tony carefully. “We did successfully defeat an alien army a few years back.”

“It doesn’t explain how you know about us though, does it?” Gamora pointed out. “The woman who sought us out, she’s from here, got mixed up in something and got given powers. We know of her and her exploits. She’s feared across the universe for what she’s been doing and yet…” She tilted her head to the side slightly, “And yet my father chooses to fear you, Tony Stark.”

Tony grimaced. “Your father being Thanos?” He sought clarification, already knowing the answer.

“He raised me,” she answered quietly. “But he wasn’t much of a father. Your friend mentioned you were trying to stop him from getting the Infinity Stones.”

It seemed Carol had given the Guardians more information than they had thought she might. Still, it at least made things a lot simpler.

“We are,” confirmed Tony, already guessing what the next question would be.

“How do you know of him?” asked Gamora.

Natasha answered: “Loki. After he lost in New York he did tell us a few things.” That last part was a lie however Tony was determined to not inform the Guardians of his and Nat’s unique circumstances and knowledge of the future. “We know he was sent by Thanos to obtain the Infinity Stone which was here. He failed.”

Gamora didn’t probe further but she leaned back in her chair.

“Why did you call us here?” asked Quill. “You’re not going to tell us how you know about us…”
“I pick up communications,” revealed Tony. It was another little stretch of a lie. But he did have satellites up in orbit, set on different frequencies to catch any transmissions. “I have satellites programmed to search for wavelengths and frequencies. It occasionally picks up transmissions. One mentioned your group, having stopped Thanos’ minions at a planet called Xandar.” Thankfully Rocket had been extremely helpful in telling them all about his own history with the Guardians during the five years after the Snap. It helped they were able to collate this information. “And Carol, Fury here is able to summon her back to Earth. We asked her back and enquired if she could reach you for us. It was the only way of getting our message to you.”

He’d already discussed with the others what he had been planning to say to their guests. It seemed only right to stay on the same page so none of them would be surprised when a little fib came out.

“You can build communication devices to pick up signals from lightyears away, yet you are incapable of creating a spaceship?” Rocket laughed.

Tony had forgotten what a dick the Racoon had been but he let it pass. “Technology is advancing. It won’t be long before we take our first steps out into the stars.”

“I am Groot!” the tree spoke up.

“What did he say?” Fury queried.

“He asked why you wanted to speak to us,” translated Quill.

“As I said, the Infinity Stones. We’ve found and destroyed two of them already.” Tony nodded towards Wanda. “Wanda was a great aid in that regard.”

“You destroyed them?” Gamora seemed surprised. “How?”

Wanda flicked her fingers, red traces floating up towards the ceiling. “My powers originate from the Mind Stone. I am capable of destroying them.”

“We know there are another four,” continued Natasha. “Our friend, Thor, intimated as much. We can’t reach him at the moment.”

“What we’d like,” added Tony, “is for you to take me and a small team to the various locations of where the Infinity Stones are hidden and enable us to destroy them, therefore preventing Thanos from gaining even one of them.”

Gamora and Quill exchanged glances before she spoke up. They’d clearly discussed this in advance, anticipating already what Tony had wanted to speak to them about based on Carol’s discussion with them when she’d tracked them down.

“We can only take you to one of them,” said Gamora. “We only know the location of one.”

They’d discussed the probability of Gamora hiding the fact she had known where the Soul Stone was located. They’d have to think of a way to ensure she divulged it to them without gaining her suspicions. They couldn’t exactly ask to take them to Vormir – that could prove disastrous for them if they named the place without being able to explain how they knew of its existence.

“What one can you lead us to?” asked Steve.

Once again the Guardians exchanged looks. Tony was surprised how quiet Drax was being.

“There is one on Xandar,” admitted Gamora. “The Nova Corps will not give it up easily. We may
have to steal it. Convincing them to release it back to us might be problematic.”

Pity they couldn’t use time travel to go back in time and take it from another point but every part of Tony’s being was telling them they had to take them from their locations where they were situated right now.

“I’m sure we can work on a plan which will work for all of us,” said Steve.

The Guardians didn’t know where the Reality Stone was currently held. Tony considered whether it would be a good idea to reveal it; however, he did know Thor knew where it was.

“We know where another is because Thor’s people placed it there,” said Tony.

“Where?” asked Gamora.

“A place called… Knowhere, with a man called The Collector?” Tony phrased it as a question.

“That man is an idiot!” Quill nearly launched into a tirade but a calming hand from Gamora soothed him.

“Thor may not have known that…” pointed out Natasha. “Can you take us there?”

“We could,” replied Gamora.

“But what’s in it for us?” interrupted Rocket. “Money?”

“I thought helping save the universe would be enough,” said Steve, his voice slightly tinged with frustration.

“Then we’re not interested!” stated Rocket, already starting to slide off his seat but noticed Quill and Gamora were not following his lead. “What? You two aren’t seriously thinking of doing this for free, are you?”

“Rocket… if Thanos gets any of the Infinity Stones he’ll be invincible… We have to stop him and if we have to do this for free, then I am volunteering my services whether you like it or not.” Gamora explained. “We can’t let him get any of the Stones.” She raised her gaze to look at Quill. “Peter?”

Quill glanced towards Tony and then back at Gamora. It was clear a decision had already been made. “We’ll help, but you’ll do what we say when on our ship, alright?”

Tony smiled and nodded. “Agreed.”

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“I wondered if Gamora may have come back as well…” said Natasha quietly as they stood in the kitchen of the Compound. “But I don’t think she has.”

“What makes you say she hasn’t?” asked Tony, lowering his voice so the others couldn’t hear.

“Because when you came back the voice told me ‘he has arrived’. I knew who I’d been waiting for, for two years was finally here. Nothing of the sort now with Gamora. And I think if she was back, she wouldn’t be hiding Vormir from us. We need to convince her to tell us otherwise we won’t be able to get to Vormir.”

“I know,” Tony bit his lower lip. “I think I have an idea but let’s wait until we’ve got the other
two.”

Natasha nodded. “A good plan.” She poured hot water into the teapot. “Who is coming with us to space?”

“Steve and Wanda… Pepper wants to come too.” He fidgeted, not liking the idea of Pepper putting her life on the line. “I’m not sure I want her to.”

“She’s been in on this from the beginning,” noted Natasha quietly. “I think we need her. And I know she’s been training in the suit you designed for her. I know you want to protect her.”

“I can’t lose her, Nat… Morgan’s life is on the line. I want my little girl. If Pepper comes with us and something happens to her…” Tony shook his head, trying to ignore the sensation of wetness in his eyes. Tony Stark never cried. He’d become a lot more emotional since becoming a father. God, he missed her.

“You’ll have her. I promise you, Morgan will be born and she’ll be the same little girl you love and adore. You’ll see her grow up, Tony. I know you will.” Natasha smiled.

Tony sighed. He wanted to believe but a part of him felt that there was a great loss still to come. He couldn’t be this lucky, could he? “Alright, Pepper can come.”

He hoped he was making the right decision.

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Friday 7th April 2017

Two days after the Guardians of the Galaxy had arrived, Tony, Natasha, Wanda, Steve, and Pepper were ready to leave Earth on the Benatar. Steve had handed the Avengers leadership over to Rhodey who was staying behind. Most of the other members of the team were unaware of why they needed to leave Earth, only it involved preventing a wider threat from reaching them. Pepper had handed the reins of Stark Industries over to her deputy who was keeping the company running in her place. All S.I knew was that Pepper was taking an extended vacation and wouldn’t be available for a few months.

Tony and Natasha promised upon their return they would tell them everything.

They boarded the Benatar with a suitcase each, not knowing for how long they would be gone for. They hoped it would only be a few months though the trip could be longer.

As Quill engaged the engines, the Benatar lifted off under cover of darkness. Tilting the nose up, he engaged the thrusters and the spaceship shot up into the sky with speed.

Tony glanced out at the disappearing landscape of the Earth below him, a slight tingle of fear erupting in his chest of being back out in space again, but he knew he had to do this.

They were on their way.

First on their destination was Knowhere, followed by Xandar and finally Vormir, if they could convince Gamora to reveal its exact location.

Tony closed his eyes, leaning back against his seat. We can do this. We can beat Thanos.

They were well on their way to achieving that goal after all.
To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

I decided a while back that Gamora would not be sent back to the past like Tony and Natasha. I debated about it for a while but ultimately decided against it. So this Gamora is just Gamora. And she is reluctant to reveal where the Soul Stone is. For now.

Steve now knows Tony and Nat are from the future but do not know the full extent of their history. He has a big role to play in this fic and I needed to bring him in from the sidelines.

Next up: The Reality Stone! To be posted next Sunday 29th December!

Merry Christmas everyone!

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty: The Reality Stone

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and the Guardians travel to Knowhere...

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I hope you all had a fantastic Christmas! I got sick again so I'm battling with a cold (yet again!!) but I am off work until 8th January (on holiday leave, not sick leave) so I hope I get a lot of writing done... In this chapter, Tony learns something unexpected which worries him as to what his fate will be...

I would also like to thank AstralEgotist_20 for their idea they gave me for a conversation between Tony and Quill which starts off this chapter. Without it, this chapter would definitely be shorter but I think the first scene is quite a good one and it allows Tony to start forming friendships with the Guardians. So, thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Reality Stone

Saturday 8th April 2017

Enroute to Knowhere

It was going to take them a few days to reach Knowhere from Earth since the place was so far away from galactic civilisation. This meant it gave time for the Guardians to talk to and get to know their travelling companions from Earth.

It had been nearly a year since Tony had been sent back from the moment of his death and in that time not only had he been focusing on ensuring they could stop Thanos, but he had also spent a small amount of time tracing the family of Peter Quill. He didn’t know why he did it, more that he was curious over the circumstances as to how Quill had ended up leaving Earth.

What he had found had been tragic. Quill had gone missing the same day his mother had died of brain cancer. He’d been eight years old. His mother had died in front of him, her last words asking her son to take her hand. He hadn’t. Tony had learned those details from Quill’s grandfather, who’d he had tracked down and spoken to, informing him he was following a potential lead which could bring them to Quill’s location. He’d given the man a tiny bit of hope. He’d been broken by the loss of his daughter and grandson on the same day.

A part of him wondered why Quill had never returned to Earth. He recalled the first time he had met him: after they’d crashed landed on Titan and been attacked, Quill had not recognised the name ‘Earth’. Was it possible he no longer recognised the name of the planet he was native too? If
Quill had been out in space for such a long time, combined with the trauma of his mother’s death and being abducted could have resulted in Quill wanting to forget all about his past and where he had originated from. His last memory of Earth had been the death of his beloved mother, no wonder Quill wanted to forget as much as he could about the place.

Quill’s mother had been his whole world. They’d spent most of their time together, hardly spending it apart. And he’d lost her in the most brutal way possible.

He wondered if this was a good idea to talk to Quill about this sensitive matter but he wanted to understand how Quill could turn his back on everything. He had the means and the opportunity to return to Earth and help them. Why hadn’t he?

Decision made, Tony made his way through the Benatar towards the cockpit where Quill was sitting, watching as the stars went past, his eyes focused on their next jump point. Gamora sat just behind him, passing him the distance he still had to travel to reach it.

“What is it, Stark?” Quill asked.

“I wondered if you and I could have a chat?”

“Alone?” Quill clarified.

“If possible.”

“Sorry, I don’t swing that way,” Quill responded and then laughed.

Tony rolled his eyes. He wasn’t going to dignify that with an answer. Instead, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against the bulkhead, ignoring the streaks of light out the viewport in front of him as they streaked through space.

Gamora moved from her chair. “Here. If you can just tell him how far we’ve got till each jump point whenever he asks, you can have my spot and talk to him. Peter can be a bit of a jerk sometimes.”

“I’ve noticed,” quipped Tony, sitting down in Gamora’s seat and looking at the familiar controls he knew from the twenty-two days he had spent in space before. He hated being back in space yet his options were limited in this case.

The ship suddenly jumped as the Benatar sailed through a jump point. Tony glanced at his instruments and saw the next jump point wouldn’t be for a while yet. Gamora had left and Quill was piloting alone. At least he could have this awkward conversation in peace without any of the others overhearing.

“What do you want to know?” Quill lazed back in his chair, holding the controls loosely with his fingers.

“Why did you never come back to Earth?”

“Why are you asking me that?” Quill questioned a slight tinge of anger in his voice.

*Oh boy, I’ve already hit a nerve.* “I just wanted to know why you never did… You have your own ship, the means to do so…”

“My family was here,” stated Quill. “There is no one back there for me.”
Tony bit his lip. He wondered whether he should tell Quill about the grandfather he had left behind. He decided to risk it. “I know you went missing in Missouri in 1988. No trace of you was ever found. It was a huge news story all across the world for many months, years even. They never gave up hope of you coming home.”

Quill remained silent, the atmosphere tense.

Tony glanced at his screen. They still had a while to go before the next jump point. He shouldn’t have bought the subject up. It was clearly a sore subject for Quill.

“You spoke to my grandfather, didn’t you?” Quill asked quietly.

Tony winced. “I did. I shouldn’t have done…”

“No… it’s fine,” answered Quill. There was a long silence before he responded again. “How is he?”

Tony shrugged. “Missing you. Looked for you for years. He lost his daughter and grandson in the same day, within minutes of one another. Every year on the day you went missing they remember you and your mother. He never gave up hope of you coming home one day.”

Quill twisted in his seat to look at Tony. “When did you do this? You couldn’t have tracked him down in the last two days.”

Tony hesitated. That was the only problem of asking these questions – it had roused Quill’s suspicions of how Tony had known who he was.

“Did the communications you receive via your satellites tell you our identities?” probed Quill. “I’m known as Star-Lord.”

Now he was in dangerous territory. He hated fibbing but in this case, he’d had no choice. He was trying to sustain the lie.

“That’s a lie. You were Quill on the transmissions from Xandar!”

Tony whirled and saw Drax standing behind them, having somehow crept up on them without either of them noticing.

Drax puffed out his chest. “And I was Drax, the saviour!” The grey-skinned humanoid stared proudly at Tony and Quill before noticing their lack of response and grumpily walked off. “No one appreciates the saviour.”

Tony blinked, struggling not to laugh at the ridiculous pronouncement. He could take a guess now. “It was Quill from Terra. Thor had told us the different names Earth went by, Terra was one of them. I decided to do a bit of investigating and found out about you.”

Quill frowned. “I guess that makes sense. As to why I never came back to Terra… I didn’t want to return to the place where my mother died…”

“You could have helped your planet.” Tony pointed out.

“How?” Quill shook his head. “Terra isn’t ready for space.”

“Despite the fact, we’ve had aliens attack us?” retorted Tony. Earth may not have discovered the resources for space-travel just yet but they were well on their way to doing so. “Who gets to decide
when we’re ready? You?”

“Do you speak for your planet?” accused Quill. “I doubt it.”

Tony’s voice darkened. “Technically I do with the position I’m in.” Being part of the Accords Committee helped with the amount of influence he had on Earth. Quill wasn’t partial to that, however. “Sooner than you think, we’ll be out there. Wouldn’t it be more beneficial if you could help your homeworld with defence?”

“If you were me,” Quill began, “would you?”

Tony hesitated. “I like to believe I would.” If he’d had the same upbringing as Quill had than he assumed he may have cultivated the same type of attitude. He may not have cared enough to return.

Quill laughed. “You think you would but in reality, you wouldn’t. I was taken at eight, Stark. I was forced into situations where I had to learn how to survive. I had to adapt quickly or, as Yondu would say, he’d feed me to his men. Little human runt I was… only useful to get into small spaces. Help them steal. Didn’t occur to me he didn’t mean it, only used it as a way to control me.”

“Sorry…” Tony admitted. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you.” The conversation wasn’t going the way he had intended it to go. “But you made it out and made a name for yourself.”

“It wasn’t that easy,” mentioned Quill quietly. “I’m not sure what I can do to help Terra. Even if I wanted to – which I don’t – seeing the people I left behind and being reminded of my mother? I can’t do it. She’s gone and she’s not coming back.”

Tony fell silent, glanced at the radar screens in front of him and saw it wasn’t much further until the next jump point. “Next jump ahead.”

“Thanks.” Quill sat in his pilot seat, directing the _Benatar_ towards the next location. “You can tell them if you want.”

Tony was certain he knew who Quill meant. “Who?” He had to check though.

“My grandfather… and the rest of the family I left behind. Tell him I’m still alive and I’m living the best life possible. Maybe I’ll see him one day. Maybe I won’t.” Quill shrugged. “If I’m ever on Terra for a longer period maybe I will pop by. I can make no promises though.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Ok.” He wasn’t too sure on what else to say. The conversation was clearly over. Quill had made it known he wasn’t interested in returning to Earth and seeing the family he had left behind or try to assist the planet that had birthed him. Tony couldn’t blame him. Despite believing he would return to Earth, Tony had no way of knowing how he’d react in the situation Quill had found himself in when he’d been abducted.

All he could do whilst waiting patiently for Gamora to return before he could leave his station was focus on how far away the next jump point was. Settling back more comfortably in the chair, he hoped it wouldn’t be too long before he was relieved.

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They were sitting at the back of the _Benatar_, away from the other crew members. Natasha leaned back against the wall, her knees up to her chest as she glanced at Steve who sat beside her on the floor, legs stretched out and his hands in his lap.
“Was the future that bad?” Steve asked quietly.

Surprised by the question, Natasha looked at Steve, studying his expression carefully. There was curiosity there, a sense of wonderment of how bad the future could be. She wasn’t sure how much she should tell him. “It could have been better,” she stated.

“How many died?”

Natasha paused, unsure of whether to confirm anything. She felt a tiny prod in her mind, the voice coming to life once again. The voice that rarely said anything now, choosing to let her and Tony make their own decisions without any outside interference.

_Tell him everything._

The indication that Steve needed to know everything was startling at best. Why was it necessary for him to know?

_Because he has a role to play._ The voice didn’t reveal much but the hint was enough for Natasha to realise Steve was important to the endgame.

“Nat?” Steve asked quietly, noticing how reluctant she was to answer.

“Steve… What I’m about to tell you cannot get back to anyone. Not even Tony.” She had the feeling Tony wasn’t supposed to know the extent of Steve’s knowledge of what their future had been like. At least not yet anyway. “Promise me you will not speak a word to anyone about what I’m about to tell you.”

“I promise,” replied Steve sincerely.

Natasha breathed in and out slowly. “Thank you.” Shuffling on her knees, she turned to face Steve. “Half the universe died, Steve.”

He jerked back in shock. “What? How?”

“The stones, Steve,” she explained. “They are integral to Thanos’ plan. If he gets them he can simply snap his fingers and erase half of all life which is exactly what he did in our future. To reverse it the cost was high, so very high.”

Steve swallowed. “What was the cost?”

She lowered her gaze. Something was telling her that Steve knowing that she and Tony had died wouldn’t be a bad thing. He needed to know. “Our lives.”

Steve blinked several times. “Yours and Tony’s?”

Natasha nodded, confirming his guess. “Yes. Thanos destroyed the Stones after he used them against us… Five years passed before we could do anything to bring everyone back…” She turned away, leaning her head back against the bulkhead. “Tony invented time-travel. We picked out years where we could access all the Stones, retrieve them and bring them back to our time.”

“What year was it?” asked Steve.

“2023,” she answered. “The world had moved on as best it could. The Avengers was pretty much disbanded. I still lead them… You ran a support group for people who had lost loved ones and were trying to move on…” Natasha bowed her head, sadness welling up inside her as she
remembered those dreary years. “Half of the Avengers were taken when Thanos snapped his fingers… Our numbers were greatly reduced… Clint lost his whole family and he disappeared for years… Thor lost over half of his people… Huh… if you knew what he had become in those five years, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” winced Steve.

“Don’t then. It shouldn’t happen this time.” Though Natasha wasn’t sure they’d be able to prevent the loss of Asgard. They were not sure if they could reach Asgard easily. They were saving the Space Stone until last in the hope that they’d still have a chance at preventing Asgard’s destruction and the loss of Thor’s people from Thanos’ rage when he’d attacked them afterward. “Bruce returned too… He changed in those five years… I won’t say how… Spoilers…”

“And Tony?” probed Steve quietly.

“He retired.” A slight smile tugged at her face. Though Tony had cut himself off from the Avengers, he had kept up a bit of contact with Natasha over the years. Pepper had also sent her the occasional photo of Morgan as she grew up. “Morgan…?” she whispered. Now there was a little girl who adored her father.

“Morgan?” Steve asked. “Nat, who is Morgan?”

Natasha bit her lower lip. “I shouldn’t…” She’d made a small error in thinking of Tony’s daughter and saying her name in Steve’s perceptive hearing.

*He needs to know…* The voice in her head urged her to continue.

She wondered why he did need to know but the voice remained silent, unwilling to give any further clues.

But Steve already knew. He could guess on the limited clues Natasha had already given. “Morgan is Tony’s child…”

Natasha nodded, affirming the information. “Yeah. His daughter. She was only four when he died. He and Pepper married and had Morgan. They chose to try to move on with their lives… And we dragged Tony back in. He didn’t want to but… equally, he couldn’t stay away. I gave my life to get one of the Stones, and Tony… He sacrificed his life to save the whole universe. It was the only way.”

Steve reached for Natasha’s hand. “I’m sorry for what happened.”

Natasha squeezed his hand. “It’s alright. We got given a chance to stop it from happening. I don’t know why we were chosen or how it happened but somehow after I died… I can’t really explain it… I still had consciousness. I was given a choice to come back and I arrived back in 2014… I couldn’t change anything… Not until Tony arrived two years later.”

“You were here for two years?”

She nodded. “I was. I died in 2014. I died in the past collecting the Stones. I guess I had to remain in the year I died. Tony ended the war in 2023 but came back to 2016. I don’t know why it was different for him but I guess 2016 was the year when things started to really go wrong for the Avengers.”

“The Accords,” whispered Steve. “That’s why you two fought so hard to get the changes made.”
“It was. I shouldn’t tell you this but nothing is telling me not to.” Natasha shifted position so she was facing him. “The Avengers broke apart and that was why we failed last time. The Accords split us and that was where everything started to go wrong. We had to stay together and the only way to do that was to keep us together… There were more advantages to us working with the Accords than not at all. We had the advantage of knowing what had happened before…” She could see the curiosity across Steve’s face. “No, I’m not telling you what happened.”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” replied Steve.

“Good,” she smiled.

“If you’ve already got two Stones and destroyed them, do we really need to go after the others? You’ve already stopped him from collecting them all,” observed Steve.

Natasha shrugged. She couldn’t exactly reveal that Tony was absorbing them. “Better to be safer than sorry.” Tony had been given powers for a reason and he was clearly meant to access them. As far they could tell all he had to do was simply touch one and it would absorb into his skin. No, it didn’t matter they had taken two out of Thanos’ reach, what mattered was that Tony needed to get his hands on them all.

“I won’t ask,” said Steve quietly.

She smiled up at him. “Thank you. When we’re ready to tell you more, we will. All we need now is your support and aid in getting what we need. Just… Promise me something, Steve.”

“Anything,” he agreed.

“Promise me you’ll support Tony. I know you two haven’t had the best of starts with a friendship. But he needs you to follow him. Tony and I… we’re both important to what is coming. I’ll be standing beside Tony when Thanos comes. I need you to be on his side too. Not just on mine.”

Natasha squeezed his hand.

Steve nodded. “I will. Tony can trust me to do the right thing.”

She smiled sadly. “More than anything he wants Morgan back. He’s fighting for the future he lost. She deserves a life with her father and her mother. Please, be there for him when he needs it.”

Steve leaned back, his gaze turning to curiosity. “Why are you making it sound like you are going to die, Nat?”

“Because I might. I might not be there at the end. We could face Thanos before the end battle comes. It doesn’t mean I will be here for all of it. Tony has to be. He’s the most important piece and he needs to be protected. Make sure he survives. Please!” Natasha squeezed his hands again.

“I promise. But if you think –”

She cut him off. “Hush. Say no more.” The look she gave Steve was enough to keep him silent. She leaned into his shoulder.

It had been on her mind for a while.

The Soul Stone and how they were supposed to retrieve it without a sacrifice.

It couldn’t be Pepper. Tony would never be able to do it.
She’d never let him try anyway.

*It has to be me. I have to die for Tony to get the Soul Stone. It’s the only way.*

It was not a comforting thought.

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**Tuesday 11th April 2017**

**Knowhere**

When they arrived at Knowhere, Natasha was surprised to learn it was a mining colony within the decapitated head of an ancient Celestial. The mining colony’s primary goal was to harvest the valuable and rare materials from the bone, brain tissue and spinal fluid, most of which remained to this day. The colony had become a safe place for outlaws since it had been established centuries ago.

They docked the *Benatar* as close to the location of where the Reality Stone was stored. The Guardians informed them that it would be held within the Collector’s Museum and they needed to contact him. It might take them a while for him to agree to see them but Natasha hoped they wouldn’t have to wait too long.

They received a notification to visit the Collector’s Museum a few hours later and were led there by his messenger, a humanoid with grey skin and no hair. They didn’t all go to the Collector’s Museum, there was no need to. Steve and Pepper stayed on the *Benatar* with Groot, Drax, and Rocket whilst Wanda, Gamora and Quill accompanied Tony and Natasha to the Museum.

When they arrived they were escorted into a large room filled with glass cages that held different specimens and objects. Some were alive, others inanimate and in some cases dead. The Collector approached them, his hands held up in front of his chest.

The Collector appeared very eccentric, his white hair brushed up, and his bottom lip and onto his chin had a black ink mark down it. He wore thick gloves and a fur coat trailed from his shoulders. A plaid jacket could be seen underneath and black trousers completed his look. His intense eyes studied them all in turn and yet Natasha couldn’t help but notice his lingering look upon Tony as he swept his gaze across his visitors.

“Welcome!” he bowed, making a point of taking Natasha’s hand and kissing it on the top.

She didn’t want to tug it away for fear of causing a diplomatic incident. They needed this man on their side.

He bowed to Gamora too before inclining his head to the others.

“What can I do to assist you?” he asked, putting his hands together in front of him.

They had all agreed for Natasha to take the lead on this one, despite the Guardian’s previous history with the Collector.

“You have something that we require,” began Natasha cautiously. “One of the six Infinity Stones. It was delivered to you by the Asgardians who gave it into your keeping for safe care. We ask for it now for the sake of the universe.”

“The universe…?” The Collector strolled away, his back to them, running a hand down one of the
“Yes,” she reaffirmed. “The Stones need to be destroyed before they can be used by the wrong people.” She didn’t want to be explicit to say Thanos’ name. The little information they had on the Collector seemed to indicate he had been around for millions of years and was one of the older beings of the universe. Gamora had filled that portion of his history in for them on their way to Knowhere.

“They don’t need to be destroyed…” the Collector said, his robes sweeping around him as he turned back to face them. “You know this surely.” He said it as a statement of fact, not hiding the fact he was staring at Tony intently before sweeping his gaze around the room once again.

Natasha didn’t like his interest in Tony but if the Collector was an ancient being, who was as old as the universe, he could probably sense the power residing within Tony and knew it had to be absorbed rather than destroyed. “The containers themselves need to be destroyed,” she continued, “so that the Stones cannot be collected and used by anyone. They may still exist but it means they become harder to collect if they are just atoms spread across the universe. That is our goal.”

The Collector stepped forward again towards her, his gaze was intense. “What do you know of the Infinity Stones?”

Natasha swallowed. “Probably not as much as you might do…”

“You told us before when we came here with one of the other Stones,” began Gamora, moving forward to stand beside Natasha, “that before creation itself, there were six singularities and that when the universe exploded into existence, the remnants of these systems were forged into Infinity Stones. Only beings of extraordinary strength could wield them and survive.” She glanced at Quill before returning her attention to the Collector.

“There is more to the Infinity Stones than I have revealed…” the Collector said. “I will reveal more… but at a price.” His eyes flickered to Tony.

Even he noticed it but Tony didn’t flinch.

“Depends on the price,” Natasha bargained. If he was going to ask for Tony…

“Something unique has been happening in the universe. The Stones are not simply disintegrating into atoms. They are merging with a new carrier, finding a new container to be protected by. My price is simple. I wish to talk to the carrier of the Infinity Stones and find out what makes them worthy to protect them than older beings.”

He could sense the power within Tony, could potentially even see it. It worried Natasha that Tony’s powers and what his potential role was could already be known by older beings.

“We can do that,” said Tony, stepping forward and standing next to Natasha, “if we ever find such a person.”

“But we do need the stone, Tivan,” added Gamora quietly, using the Collector’s first name to address him. “Finding such a person who could be merging to become a new carrier could take years.”

“It won’t,” the Collector replied, his eyes focused solely upon Tony. “They’re right here after all, in this very room. I’m looking at him right now.”

Quill shook his head, surprise running across his features. “Wait. What? Him?” He pointed to
Tony. “Really? The Universe has to be having a laugh!”

Wanda moved in front of Tony who had stepped back slightly, her hands glowing red as she stared at the Collector. “You will not touch him!”

“I do not wish to collect him, dear girl, I simply wish to determine why he is worthy. Why was he chosen out of everyone else in the entire universe? Why was he chosen?” The Collector didn’t edge forward but kept his gaze completely on Tony.

Natasha could see the weary and surprised gazes of Quill and Gamora and she knew the game was up. They wouldn’t be able to hide the fact that they were not destroying the Stones.

“The other two were not destroyed were they?” Gamora asked quietly.

Natasha swallowed and reluctantly nodded. “They weren’t. There is more about us than you know but we are all on the same side here. I promise to tell you when we get back to the ship.”

The Collector spread his arms out. “I mean him no harm. I just wish to talk to him privately.”

“Tony?” Natasha asked. She couldn’t make this decision for him.

“I’ll talk if Nat is there too,” stated Tony, folding his arms across his chest. “But you have to show us the Reality Stone first.”

The Collector paused, considering the offer Tony had made.

Natasha held her breath waiting patiently for his response.

The Collector moved quickly, reaching out his hand towards Tony. “Shake and we have a deal.”

Trading a quick glance with her, Tony took the Collector’s hand and made the deal.

“Follow me…” The Collector bowed, indicating for Tony and Natasha to follow him.

Glancing over her shoulder, Natasha looked at Wanda, Quill, and Gamora. “You will get your answers. We just need to sort this out before we can.”

“Gamora tells me I have to wait,” replied Quill, absentmindedly kicking the floor, “but don’t be too long!”

“We won’t,” she smiled and hurried after Tony’s retreating back.

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The Collector leaned back in a chair in the office he’d led them to, just a short walk from his collection. His eyes remained focused upon Tony. “You are an interesting specimen…”

Tony didn’t sit down in the offered chair. “I would prefer not to be called ‘specimen’ when addressed, thank you very much.”

“Then what shall I call you?”

“I think you already know who I am,” replied Tony curtly. “You look middle-aged but I doubt you are.”

The Collector smirked. “Correct, Tony Stark. I am an elder of the universe. I have been around for
“Which is how come you know a lot about the Stones,” noted Natasha. “Now, show us the Reality Stone as you promised you would or we will walk out of here right now.”

“Walking out of here wouldn’t be so easy,” said the Collector, amused his eyes once again on Tony.

Tony had a feeling something was going to happen. He didn’t feel safe and there was warmth in his chest which hadn’t been there before.

The Collector turned to the wall, pressed a few buttons on a control pad, imprinted his hand upon a scanner and had his eyes looked at before the wall slid partially open revealing a small, lantern-shaped container. In the centre it was glowing slightly red and a buzzing sound could be heard. “Your proof.”

“We want to see it properly,” emphasised Nat. “Open it.”

Tony moved closer to Natasha. “I don’t think that is wise.”

“Why not?”

“Not sure… But let’s wait. I know it is in there,” he whispered. “My chest feels warm again like it was for the other two.”

The Collector was watching them beadyly. “If you want this, you promised to talk. Tell me why you are worthy, Tony Stark?”

Tony shrugged. “I would consider myself not worthy and yet here I am. I can’t answer your questions because I do not have the answers myself.”

“You are something… new…” the Collector murmured. “Something… dangerous. And yet this Stone is responding to you. It wants to get out.”

The noise from the container was increasing and they could hear it bashing itself against the sides of the container, trying everything to break free from its prison.

“What would happen if I let it out?” The Collector moved his hand to the latch at the top of the container and pulled it up.

“Don’t!” Natasha reached forward. “Don’t let it out.”

“You can’t escape,” said the Collector. “Tell me what you are and I’ll let you go.”

“He’s human!” shouted Natasha. “That’s all he is!” She struggled but couldn’t get loose. “Let us go!”

“If he was human, he would not be able to contain the Infinity Stones.” The Collector raised the
container again. “If you will not talk then I shall act.”

Tony’s eyes widened. The last thing he wanted was for this to happen. Deep down he knew he had to be something more than human for him to be able to absorb the Infinity Stones. The question was: what was he? He was afraid and his chest was feeling hot. Not like this… not like this!

And then the Collector opened the container and a red sludge stormed out, magnifying in size. The red sludge’s appearance caused the Collector to stumble and then fall back, his own eyes widening at the sight of what the Reality Stone could become.

Tony could see the sludge glowing red, his own body beginning to shine red and the sludge drifted towards him, solidifying itself into a smaller shape until it was a Stone. Floating in mid-air the Stone hovered right in front of his chest.

Intense warmth spread across his whole body and he felt so hot… So unnaturally hot…

His vision went dark briefly and the next thing he knew was on the floor of the Collector’s office and the Reality Stone was on the floor next to him. Shaking his head, he saw Gamora in front of the Collector, blaster aimed at his face, with Quill and Wanda standing guard. Twisted beads of magic drifted from the tips of Wanda’s fingers.

He felt thin fingers hold him by the shoulders as he took in deep breaths.

“Tony,” Natasha whispered. “Take it. You know you have to.”

Tony nodded, reached out for the Reality Stone with his right arm but as soon as his fingers touched the smooth surface of the Stone, it turned into sludge again, attaching itself to his fingers. He jerked back but was unable to release himself from the grip of the sludge. Turning his hand over, the sludge covered his whole hand before it began to melt into his hand.

“What the –”

Tony drowned out Quill’s voice as his chest warmed and his right arm glowed the same shade of red as the Stone, and then the last tendrils of the sludge vanished into his palm and the warmth feeling disappeared as the glow around his arm dissipated.

Three down, three to go.

He glanced up at Natasha who offered him her hand and got to his feet. The Collector was still surrounded by the others but Wanda was lowering her hands now, the tendrils of power from her fingers vanishing into thin air and Gamora was lowering her own blaster before stepping back.

The Collector brushed down his clothes and resumed looking at Tony. “You are definitely something new, Tony Stark, perhaps even more powerful than the ancients themselves.”

“You’ll let us go?” asked Tony, trying to mask the croakiness in his throat.

The Collector bowed rather emphatically, brushing his arms out behind him in a wide arc. “Of course. I… always keep… to my… word.” He almost seemed afraid.

Tony ran out of the room.

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“Ok, can someone explain what the hell is going on?” Quill shouted as they walked back to the
Benatar, with Tony a little way in front of him.

Natasha couldn’t blame Tony for wanting to keep his distance. Two people had witnessed what their true purpose was in finding the Stones. Quill and Gamora were never supposed to find out, but then everyone they had tried to keep it from had discovered it one way or another.

Perhaps they were not meant to hide Tony’s unique abilities.

“You won’t believe us even if we tried to explain it to you,” said Natasha.

“Try us,” stated Gamora, one hand on the hilt of the sword she carried with her.

They had to go for the simplest explanation possible. “We cannot explain why Tony can do what he can. All we know is that we had an Infinity Stone in our possession and Tony absorbed it. We found a second on Earth and the same thing happened. We realised that was what we had to do. We need to find them and get Tony to touch them. I can’t explain why he is capable of absorbing them. He just is. We need your help to get the rest.” She locked eyes with Gamora. “If you know of anyone who could possibly know where the Soul Stone rests, the exact galactic coordinates, we need to know. Otherwise, there is still a chance Thanos would win. If Tony can absorb them, then they could, potentially, be forcibly removed from him. We need your help to stop him together.”

“No one knows where the Soul Stone resides,” said Gamora quietly.

“Tony needs it,” said Natasha quietly. “Otherwise…” She trailed off. They knew the Soul Stone was on Vormir but the exact galactic co-ordinates she didn’t know. Nebula had pre-programmed the co-ordinates into the Benatar back when they’d arrived in 2014 on Morag. She needed Gamora to tell them the co-ordinates.

Gamora stayed silent but her eyes were watchful.

“Please don’t tell the others what happened there,” said Natasha quietly. “We’ll talk to them when the time is right.” Though she knew the time was rapidly coming when everything would have to be revealed to everyone who was a part of the Avengers.

“I’m not so keen on keeping secrets from my crew,” stated Quill, lifting his chin and folding his arms across his chest, creasing the jacket he wore.

“You keep secrets from them all the time.” Gamora swatted him on the arm. “We’ll keep it quiet on the condition you say something soon.”

Natasha nodded. “Thank you. We will.” She glanced ahead and saw Tony at the bottom of the Benatar’s ramp being embraced by Pepper. Picking up the pace she jogged over to them, gently tapping Tony on the shoulder.

He turned to face her, one arm still wrapped around Pepper.

“We need to talk,” she said quietly.

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They locked themselves in one of the smaller quarters of the Benatar.

Tony sat beside Pepper, head bowed whilst Natasha leaned back against the wall. The dim light cast shadows around the room.

“The Collector,” grated out Nat. “He knew more about Tony than we considered possible. He held us against our will and released the Reality Stone, wanting to know why Tony is capable of absorbing them. As a result Quill and Gamora now know that we not just simply destroying the Stones.”

“It’s not that…” whispered Tony. “I don’t know how I got on the floor.”

“What do you mean?” Natasha seemed startled.

“Between the Reality Stone hovering in front of my chest to it and me being on the floor!” he retorted. “What happened?”

Natasha gasped. “You don’t know what happened? What you did?”

Tony shook his head. “No!”

“Nat, what happened?” pressed Pepper.

Natasha paced up and down the room before turning and getting to her knees so she was in front of Tony and he was forced to look at her. “Tony, nothing bad happened. We were held against the wall. The Stone was in front of you. Then your whole body sort of glowed yellow and green… And then you spoke. It was with your voice.”

“What did I say?” breathed Tony.

“‘You will let us go,’” she repeated. “It was quite forceful but I thought it was you speaking…”

He shook his head, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. “It wasn’t. I don’t remember doing it. I blacked out.”

Natasha swallowed, processing the new information. “Oh. The Collector let us go and we both fell to the floor. I did land on my feet but you completely crumpled. Then Gamora, Quill, and Wanda appeared. They said they had heard strange noises and decided they had to investigate and then I rushed over to you…”

“And you told me to take it,” said Tony. “Whatever spoke with my voice wasn’t me.” He pulled Pepper into a hug. “Nat, what if at the end of this, when I’ve absorbed all the Stones, what if I’m no longer me?” He tapped his chest. “There is something in here that can take control of my body and I don’t remember it. What if my fate is to die, to be a vessel but lose myself along the way?”

Natasha shook her head vigorously. “No, I refuse to believe that is what will happen to you, Tony.” She reached for one of his hands. “Listen to me, I know you may find it hard to believe this, but I am sure you will not lose yourself. Maybe because you cannot use your powers yet, they are still separate entities within you and when they feel threatened they take over? If you are supposed to protect them, once you are all fully merged together, you will remember.”

Tony nervously laughed. “It’s nice you are so optimistic, Romanoff, but I don’t share it.”

Pepper pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Tony… Everything is going to be fine.” There was worry in her eyes, Natasha could see, keeping strong for Tony. “As long as you have me, you’ll be fine. I won’t let you lose yourself.”

Tony swallowed. “We might not have a choice, Pep.”
“There is always a choice,” she returned.

Natasha nodded emphatically. “Tony, trust me when I say this; those that love and care for you will be with you every step of the way. We will not let you lose yourself.”

**To be continued...**
4) What held Tony and Nat in place was a forcefield pressing them against the wall. I didn't explicitly say what was holding them against the wall so just wanted to clarify in my notes.

5) The relationship between the Stones and Tony and how it involves Natasha as well will become clearer. We're getting quite a bit of information now but not everything... There is still a lot to be revealed! :D

Happy new year everyone! This will be the last update of 2019... with the next one coming on Sunday 5th January 2020!

And, as a little tease, here are the chapter titles for the four chapters I'd like to post in January on the 5th, 12th, 19th, 26th...

Chapter Twenty-One: The Power Stone
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Soul Stone
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Wedding
Chapter Twenty-Four: Bruce Returns

See you all in 2020!

the-writer1988
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Power Stone

Wednesday 12th April 2017

Mid-flight

Natasha and Tony agreed to an arrangement with Quill and Gamora that they would reveal everything to the remaining members of the Avengers and the Guardians once they had collected the next two Stones. They’d rather tell them all at once rather than go through the same story twice. Though Quill was not keen on waiting longer than necessary, he acquiesced to Gamora who supported them in their decision to keep certain things secret for a little while longer.

They weren’t sure how Gamora convinced Quill to support her in her decision, only that they’d disappeared for a while and then when they’d returned Quill had been grudgingly accepting of their stance, realising it would be more beneficial if the same story was not repeated twice.

It would take them a few more days to reach Xandar. They didn’t want to rush but neither did they want to be away from Earth for too long.

Tony kept mostly to himself, spending a lot of time with Pepper in the back of the Benatar whilst the others were with the Guardians. Everything that was happening to him scared him. He wanted to spend as much time with Pepper as possible in case the end of his journey wasn’t the one he was hoping for.

He wanted to settle down and be with her and have Morgan, watch his little girl grow up in a safe world, knowing that there was no risk of her daddy ever leaving her. But now he couldn’t help
worry about the idea she may not even exist and the only thoughts he’d have of her were the memories he had made when she had existed.

“Tony?”

He glanced up and found Steve standing there.

Tony’s fingers curled into Pepper’s hair. She was resting on his chest, listening to his heartbeat as she dozed.

“What is it?”

Steve lowered his voice. “It doesn’t have to be now… but… can I talk to you?”

“Sure.” Tony gently moved Pepper off his chest. “I can come now.”

“Are you sure?” Steve’s eyes widened as he watched Tony gently manoeuvre Pepper into a more comfortable position on the bunk they had been given. “You two looked quite comfy there.”

Tony smiled gently. “Yeah, we were, but you wouldn’t be asking to talk to me unless you really needed to.” He glanced back at Pepper who had rolled onto her side; aware Tony had left her but was still in a doze. “I’ll be back, sweetheart.” He closed the door behind him. “Not too many places for us to speak quietly on this ship without being overheard though…”

Steve grimaced. “I know. I asked Gamora if there is a place I could talk to you in private without being overheard. She offered me her quarters.”

Tony accepted that. It seemed reasonable and Gamora appeared honourable enough that she’d respect their privacy and ensure they were not interrupted or overheard.

Her quarters were small and lacked decoration. There were a few stray pictures of her and Quill scattering the walls. There was a single bunk and a desk to sit at and a few pairs of changes of clothes that hung on the opposite wall on hangers. It was simplistic but liveable.

Tony sat down on the bunk. “What is it?”

“I know about Morgan,” stated Steve simply.

Tony hadn’t been expecting that revelation. His eyes darkened only briefly, wondering how Steve could have come by such information only to realise it had come from Natasha. “She shouldn’t have told you.”

“Nat told me not to say anything to you,” stated Steve, lowering his gaze.

“They why have you? Why betray her trust?” pushed Tony, curious as to what Steve’s motivations were.

Steve bit his lower lip and looked around the room before replying. “Because I wanted you to know I will do anything to ensure you get your family back. That you get to live the life you lost.”

Tony sat up straighter. Steve knew more than he was letting on. He swallowed. “You know we died, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And the idea of people coming back from the dead doesn’t freak you out?” Tony pressed, leaning
forward, testing Steve’s morals.

“I slept for seventy years,” shrugged Steve. “I’m in space, with aliens. I think people coming back from the dead could be classed as relatively normal now.”

Tony leaned back, shuffling up a bit so he could cross his legs on the bed.

“What was she like?”

Tony had a feeling he was asking about Morgan. “My daughter?” Memories flooded his brain of his little girl, of the last hug he had given her before he had left for the Compound, of the last smile and her wave at him as he drove away from the cabin...

Steve nodded. “Yeah.” He walked over to the bunk and sat next to Tony.

Tony turned to face him, one cheek resting against the wall. “Do you want kids, Cap?”

Hesitation crossed Steve’s face. “Maybe I once did… But…”

“What?”

“I said this to you once before,” admitted Steve. “The guy who wanted all of that went under the ice. The woman I loved is gone. I can’t get that back. But I have a life here now. Something to live and fight for, so people can go home and be with their loved ones. I couldn’t abandon them if I had a chance to go back either… Not after everything we’ve been through.” He shifted in his position. “Tony, you had a family and you gave it up to save the universe. I once accused you of not being capable of making such a sacrifice. I was wrong. You did and you lost everything you ever wanted. I’m not going to let that happen.”

Tony smiled sadly. “There is no guarantee I will get what I want, Steve. Morgan may just remain a memory of a life I once led.”

Steve reached out and patted Tony’s shoulder. “She won’t. She’ll live, Tony. She’ll have you as a father. I know it.”

Tony chuckled. “It’s nice you have optimism about Morgan.”

Steve turned to fully face Tony. “So, tell me about her. What was the future daughter of Tony Stark like?”

And Tony told him everything.

“Sorry.”

Tony turned to Natasha. She was waiting just outside the room he had left Pepper in. “What are you sorry for?”

“For telling Steve about…” She trailed off.

He knew what she meant. “It’s okay. I think Steve is meant to know. It felt… right to be talking to him about her… It keeps her memory alive.”

Natasha chuckled. “I’m glad you’re not too mad.”
“Something tells me Steve has a role to play. It’s just a feeling but what is it? I wish I knew…”

“I think if we know too much we risk it not happening,” replied Natasha. She uncrossed her arms. “Tony… there is one other thing…”

“Vormir?” he guessed, his voice low. He’d been thinking about it too.

“What are we going to do?”

Tony sighed. “I think we ignore it for now and face it when the time comes. At the moment we don’t know if we will be able to get there yet, do we? We lack the co-ordinates… No point in worrying about it until we have them.”

She nodded, agreeing with his sentiment. “Focus on the Power Stone first.”

“That’s all we can do,” he quipped. “We cannot afford to be distracted thinking about the future.” He turned back towards the door but then spoke quietly. “We will be arriving at Xandar soon. And we will need a plan because I don’t think well be able to retrieve the Power Stone as easily as we hope. We’ve had an easy run of it so far. We can’t be this lucky.”

“No,” she agreed. “But we’ll be ready for whatever comes our way.”

Tony hoped she was right.

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**Saturday 15th April 2017**

**Xandar**

They arrived at Xandar a few days later and were given permission to dock at the Nova Corps Headquarters where the Power Stone was being kept inside its Orb and was stored and protected by the Xandarian military force.

Irani Rael, the commander of the Nova Corps, had agreed to meet with them, though Quill had not specified exactly why they needed to talk with her, only that it was a matter of urgency. Considering the Guardians had saved Xandar once before, they were able to get in to see her relatively quickly.

They were escorted by Rhomann Dey into her office which overlooked the vast city. As they walked to her office through the large winding corridors, Rhomann explained to the Earth-bound Avengers the history of Xandar.

“I’m surprised your Guardian friends did not explain the vastness of the Nova Empire to you?” Rhomann Dey explained.

“We thought that would be a job for you since you are so knowledgeable my good friend!” Quill said. Only he and Gamora were accompanying the Avengers into the city.

“They might not want to know…” Rhomann pointed out.

“We do,” said Pepper. “It’s interesting to see how other cultures live and work.”

“Quill said you are from Terra. Surprising to see you out here. Your world isn’t in contact with other civilisations yet.”
“But we’ve had interest from others,” explained Steve. “We haven’t been left alone. There are people from Earth who were taken like Quill was.”

“Surely we need to start making our mark on the universe?” added Tony.

“I heard Terra already did. We know all about the attack Thanos made on your planet a few years back. Some metal man came through a portal and blew his army up,” countered Rhomann.

Tony held up a hand. “Yeah, that metal man was me in my suit.”

“Really?” Rhomann paused in his walk to scrutinise Tony. “That was you? The metal suit guy?”

Tony grinned, tapping his chest piece so the armour grew around his body. “I invented this suit. Upgraded it since the battle. It is a lot more durable now.”

“Wow,” breathed Rhomann. “You took down Thanos’ army with a single missile.”

_I also took him down with a snap of my fingers too,_ mused Tony. “I don’t think the same trick would work twice.” He was sure Thanos would have made countermeasures for any such repeat attack. He tapped the Arc Reactor again and the suit nanonites retreated back into its housing unit.

“So, fill us in about the Nova Empire then. I run a business – err, I mean, Pepper, here,” he cast a sheepish glance back at her, “runs a business back on Earth. If we ever have the opportunity to work together I’m sure we could come to some arrangement which would benefit us both.”

Rhomann cleared his throat. “Xandar is the capital of the Nova Empire. It is home to Xandarians many other species across the Andromeda Galaxy. It has a population of twelve billion. As you can see there are three suns in the system, all positioned at different points and distances giving the planet a rather unique eco-system. Longer days, shorter years. The Nova Corps itself is an intergalactic military and police force who patrols the Nova Empire. This is led by the Nova Prime who is Irani Rael, our commander. You’ll be meeting her shortly. The Nova Empire expands over a good portion of the galaxy. We all work together to ensure peace continues across all manner of peoples. We are in a position of peace for now due to the treaty signed by both Xandar and the Kree, though the treaty is fraught with difficulties. For the first time in a long while we are able to live in harmony, though rebel factions of the Kree refuse to obey the new laws.”

“Do the Kree government assist you with the threats?” asked Steve.

Rhomann sighed, his shoulders dropping. “I’m afraid not.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a treaty,” murmured Wanda to Steve.

“We have to make do with what was offered to us,” explained Rhomann. “Whilst the treaty doesn’t always work, it has its advantages. A lot of the Nova Corps have more of a chance of being at home with their families than hardly being there. We’re not needed out on the frontier anymore, fighting an ever ending battle against the Kree.”

“I suppose there is a silver lining to everything,” noted Tony carefully. He hoped this would be one civilisation they would save. He knew from before Thanos had succeeded in wiping out the Xandarians for his quest for the Power Stone. This time, Tony was taking it from its place before he could even turn his attention towards it.

They emerged into a large, round office, where an older woman, with white hair curled up at the back, sat gracefully in the seat at her desk. She smiled warmly at her guests as they approached her. She stood from her chair, walked around the desk and extended a hand towards Quill and Gamora and then to Tony and the others.
“Let me welcome you to the Nova Empire. I am Irani Rael, commander of the Nova Corps. The communication we received is highly unusual in nature. We opened up this slot for you, Peter Quill and Gamora because of your previous deeds in saving Xandar before.”

Gamora smiled warmly. “We are grateful you could accommodate us at such short notice. We are not here to warn you of an impending threat. We wish to retrieve something which we gave into your keeping a few years ago.”

Irani Rael’s expression changed instantly. She knew what they were requesting and they could already see what her answer would be. “The stone?”

Gamora nodded. “Yes. It’s not safe here.”

“It is securely protected,” Rael stated matter-of-factly. “No one has any hope of breaking in and taking it.”

“Thanos could,” Tony warned. He had after all decimated Xandar for daring to hold the Infinity Stone from him. “He’s going to come for the Stone and you will not succeed in holding him back.”

Thanos’ name caused Rael to step back, a brief expression of shock appearing on her features before she composed herself.

“He wouldn’t dare.”

“He would and he will,” said Gamora. “He wants to gather all the Infinity Stones together. The one in your vault is one of them. I was sent to retrieve it for him when I defected and decided to hide it from him, to stop him from achieving his goal. The only reason he hasn’t struck yet is that he is waiting. He is still gathering his forces. He is not yet at full strength but he soon will launch his crusade to find them all and complete his life’s work.”

Tony watched Irani Rael’s expression. “We take the Stone away today, we will eliminate the threat of Thanos coming here to retrieve it. Your people will be safe and your Empire will not be destroyed by the hand of one man.”

“We will be able to stand against him,” Rael was adamant about that. “The Stone is much safer here. It will stay. If that is what you wish to speak to me about, then our meeting is over.” She cast her gaze over them all. “I’m sorry, but I am not risking a power of that magnitude to fall into the wrong hands by releasing it from its prison. I cannot take the risk.”

Tony was not surprised by her decision. He’d been expecting some difficulty in obtaining the Power Stone. But if she was denying them the option of giving it to them, they’d have to find a way to take it, which meant breaking the law, and potentially ruining the Guardian’s rep with Xandar. He shrugged. “Fine. Don’t say we didn’t warn you when Thanos is on your doorstep and he doesn’t spare any of you.”

It was harsh but necessary criticism.

Tony led the way out.

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“What do we do now?” asked Steve as they mingled back at the Benatar.

Tony leaned back against the bulkhead. “We wait. We plan. And we steal.” It wasn’t ideal yet it was the only option they had now they had been denied the Power Stone.
“She won’t negotiate on this,” added Quill. “The Xandarians are prideful. They think they are in the best position to protect it from any threat.”

“They do have a point when they have some of the best security on the planet,” said Gamora. “But Thanos would be able to get past them.”

“What do we do?” asked Pepper quietly.

“Sneak in and steal it,” said Rocket, speaking up from the pilot’s chair over the intercom. As soon as they’ve arrived and settled back in, he’d taken the Benatar back up and out into open space. “Your only option.”

“If we do that, we lose all goodwill we have with Xandar,” said Gamora.

“What choice do we have?” asked Tony. “We’re backed into a corner.”

“Or, you know,” said Rocket again over the intercom, “you could look at the scanners and see what is hovering outside the system.”

Curious by his words, the others made their way to the cockpit, crowding together in the small space.

Rocket magnified the scanner screens, showing a small blip that was just visible on the edge of the scanner. “Picked this up not too long ago. It’s out of range of the Xandar sensors but not from ours. Just tiny pin-pricks of a system ticking over.”

“What does it mean?” Steve queried.

Gamora turned to face the others. If her colour could turn paler it would have done. “It means the Black Order is already here.”

They returned to Xandar, this time landing in one of the public spaceports instead of going through the Nova Corps. They doubted they would be believed if they called to say they’d detected one of Thanos’ ships in the system. It didn’t mean he was there himself, however.

“Tony?” Natasha whispered quietly as the conversed in the corner as the others made plans to potentially prevent the Black Order from attacking the Nova Corps and retrieving the Power Stone. “This didn’t happen before.”

“For all we know, it could have done,” noted Tony. “We know it was the first Stone he collected.”

“But the attack on Thor’s ship will not happen until next year. Bruce told us when he returned he’d only had the Power Stone a week before attacking the Asgardians,” explained Natasha. “So why is he starting now?”

Tony swallowed, not wanting to think about the idea Thanos had caught onto what they were doing and was beginning his quest earlier than they intended. “Maybe he had several failed attempts before Thanos came himself. The ship picked up on the edge of the system isn’t Thanos’ capital one. Not the one he arrived in when he attacked Earth after we brought everyone back.”

“I wasn’t there for that,” replied Natasha. She’d already been dead at that time.

Tony winced. “Sorry.”
“Don’t worry.” She waved a hand. “Maybe he tried several times to get the Power Stone. He didn’t succeed straight away because he didn’t come himself.”

Tony nodded, realisation hitting him. “So he’s sent the Black Order, his children, to try to retrieve it for him. If this happened before, the Nova Corps were able to repel them and keep the Stone safe.”

“Which would fit with their assertion it is safer with them,” added Natasha, musing thoughtfully.

“But we need to turn this situation to our advantage,” grudged Tony. “If they are attacking the Nova Corps, we stand a chance of getting in unnoticed and taking the Power Stone ourselves.”

They glanced back at the others who were pouring over maps and plans of the Nova Corps base and their Vault, making plans as to how they could get in.

“We will have to help defend their headquarters,” said Tony. “The others will.”

“And you?” Natasha guessed.

“If I stay away and try to make my way to the Vault I could stand a chance of getting in without being noticed and absorb the Stone before any of the Black Order gets anywhere near it,” planned Tony.

“You don’t want anyone with you?” she prised.

Tony shook his head, his fingers resting on his Arc Reactor. “No. I think it would be better if it is just me trying to make my way in. That way if I am caught I can take the blame. The rest of you would be heralded as heroes whereas I would be a thief.”

Natasha chuckled. “I don’t think the voices would take too kindly to you getting yourself imprisoned.”

“In this case, I think they’ll help me out. This is what we have to do, Nat, get the Stones. This is the opportunity we need to take it without anyone noticing.” Tony winced. “I’d rather not be away from the fight, but I need to absorb the Stone. If I don’t…”

“I know…” whispered Natasha. Everything was riding on this. The future they were trying to prevent all depending on Tony’s ability to get the Power Stone without being noticed.

“The Black Order’s attack is a silver lining in that it gives me the perfect opportunity to take the low ground and sneak away whilst the rest of you mount a defence.” Tony’s lips twitched at the side.

Natasha pursed her lips. “We better hope this works. We only have one chance.”

Tony couldn’t help but agree.

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**Monday 17th April 2017**

Surprisingly the Black Order didn’t attack for a further two days. The assumption was that they were scouting out the territory before mounting an assault on the Nova Corps citadel. It made sense, especially since they had used stealth to enter the system and land on Xandar with a smaller craft. Unfortunately, despite the fact the Guardians had managed to hack into the manifests of the
various spaceports around the planet, they hadn’t been able to trace the ship the Black Order had arrived on.

They just had to sit and wait for the attack to begin which meant constant monitoring and continual rotation so everyone was well rested for the time when the attack would take place.

It was late at night that the Black Order attacked, setting off an explosion on the other side of the city, resulting in the majority of the Nova Corps to head in that direction, leaving the citadel lesser protected.

Whilst Steve led the Guardians in to help the Nova Corps at the incident, Tony and Natasha, alongside Pepper and Wanda, waited by the citadel, their eyes focused on any movement that would indicate the arrival of the Black Order. They were each positioned at strategic points, ever watchful, ready to act at the first sign of trouble.

Tony was suited up fully, waiting for the signal to move in.

“Tony, I see two figures slinking in at a side entrance. They’ve just killed four guards.” Pepper’s voice came over his com-unit. “They’ve forced their way into the building.”

“Just what I wanted to hear,” said Tony. “Ok, plan A is a go. Distract them and I’ll sneak past to get to the Vault before they do. As soon as I have the Stone, I’ll let you know and we will flee. If we time this right, we may be able to blame the Stone’s loss on the Order themselves and divert attention from us.”

“They’ve silenced the alarms,” confirmed Wanda. “I’m going in.”

“Be careful.” Tony didn’t want anyone to get hurt. “Pepper, be safe.” He hated the thought that she was out there in the suit he had made for her. If she had to be involved, he’d rather she was close to him. He could at least protect her better this way, even if he was sneaking in himself. “Let me know when I’m good to go.”

He stayed quiet on the comms. Steve would be able to contact him from his mission if anything was going remiss. The idea was to keep communication free from each separate team until Tony gave the confirmation he had obtained the Stone.

He had to wait for his cue, wait for Natasha to give him the all-clear. He had to not be observed getting through otherwise it would all be for nothing. If he could get to the Vault and obtain the Power Stone without being seen… The possibilities of things going wrong were high and yet Tony had hoped they might work out the way they wanted them to.

Engaged his thrusters, Tony flew up to the top of the Nova Corp Headquarters, away from the office where Irani Rael’s office. He was sure she would be monitoring the situation from there. He needed to avoid her sensors though he was sure they wouldn’t be able to get in and out undetected, not now the alarms had been silenced. They’d briefly gone off for a few seconds before silencing.

He leaned down, looking over the top at the pavement below, at the side entrance he intended to use as soon as he was given the go-ahead. This entrance was on the other side of the building, further away from the Vault but it should give him a free run to get through as quickly as possible. Hovering down a bit further, Tony settled on the ledge closest to the entrance, listening intently. Any guards that had been there before had been pulled inside to deal with the intruders.

He could hear shouts and screams in the distance and sirens going off as the other half of the Black Order descended upon the city. He hoped the others were alright.
“Tony?”

“Wanda?” Tony had been expecting Natasha to give him the all-clear.

“We’re engaged with them. You have your chance!” She abruptly cut the connection, clearly a sign that they were fighting to hold them back to give Tony the time he needed.

Tony engaged his thrusters, flew down and fired at the closed door. He’d already assessed the possibility of his weaponry being able to blast it open and he’d been pleased to see that the multitude of weapons he had at his disposal was capable of getting through.

He didn’t pause in his flight to check, only followed his sensors to where the Vault was. It was located deeper within the Citadel, underneath the basement, in one of the most secure places on the planet. Even those protections hadn’t stopped Thanos before, nor would it prevent Tony from making it past either. He was meant to have the Stone.

Landing on his feet, Tony redacted the nanonites from his face. He was close as he could be without having to work his way through the defences. He stood in front of a round, metallic door. There was a panel to the side consisting of nine numbers. Should he just break the panel or try to hack his way in? He couldn’t break it as doing so might stop the circuits from working. He’d have to try to hack in.

Instructing the nanonites to pull back, Tony reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device Quill had given him as they’d left. Quill had emphasised he was only allowing Tony to borrow this, not keep it. He wouldn’t really have a use for an alien hacker device anyway. He was sure his own suit would be able to get into the Vault but he supposed blowing them up was the more destructive way than trying to sneak in.

Placing the rectangle-shaped device beside the panel, Tony took the two short wires from the device and pressed them on the sensors of the panel. Numbers began to scroll across the screen, followed by an array of letters which one could select if they pressed the correct number on the panel which corresponded with that letter. The system was complicated but one Tony was used to.

Twenty seconds felt like forever before the device flashed up numbers and letters, a link of sixteen connected together, forming the passcode to open the door.

B57GIZX1Q08LK2RF

Swiftly inputting the code, Tony stepped back as the door opened. Grinning, he flew through, flying down the next two corridors at speed before coming to a halt at another digital code lock. Employing the same technique worked again, only this time, when the door opened, it opened onto an old fashioned staircase.

He supposed they wanted to make it harder to exit the Vault rather than provide a direct lift to it. Smart thinking and would make his escape a lot more difficult. It was surprising though that a technologically advanced civilisation would simply have a stair-case going down to the Vault though. He wasn’t going to argue the semantics of it; he just needed to make do with what he could.

Instead of hovering down the stairs, Tony took them one at a time, careful to be as quiet as possible. He could have retracted the suit back into the Arc Reactor however doing so would leave him defenceless. His sensors told him there weren’t any heat signatures below him but he couldn’t take the risk. Just because they radiated no heat, didn’t mean something couldn’t be alive. There were so many varied species out in the universe that a lack of heat signature could not be used to
blindly assume there were no guards.

He had just reached the bottom of the stairs when Pepper’s voice came over his communicator.

“Tony! One got away. He’s on his way to your location! We’re trying to contain the other one!”

Tony acknowledged the message. Damn it. He wondered which Black Order member it was who he would end up facing. There was no way Tony would be able to retrieve the Power Stone and escape before the child of Thanos arrived.

“Better not be Squidward,” he mused out loud as he made his way down a dimly lit corridor towards another door which had three keypads, two aligning it and one slightly higher up. “Damn it, them and their keypads.” He quickly pulled out the device again, aligning the wires on the sensors before setting the device in motion.

All he needed was a minute to get the door open. Each lock would take twenty seconds. Sixty seconds was enough time for them to catch up to him.

“Reinforcements have arrived for the Nova Corps!” Natasha reported. “They’re going to electrify the doors. It might buy you some time!”

“Thanks,” Tony replied, inputting the first set of passwords. “I’m at the Vault now. Just trying to get through their security!”

“Be careful,” Natasha advised.

Tony hastily repositioned the wires on the second sensor to the right of the door. He could hear thumping and shots getting closer to him, meaning that the Black Order member was being accosted by others as they tried to make their way to the Vault. If they could just hold him back…

The second password was keyed in. Using his thrusters to get himself next to the last one located above the door, Tony positioned the wires again, setting the device in motion. The password came slightly quicker than twenty seconds and he hurriedly put in the code.

Moving back, the door opened into a smallish, dimly lit room were in the centre, on a podium sat, what Tony first presumed was a microwave (because it looked like one) but was clearly a heavily secured safe where inside he could see the Orb which contained the Power Stone.

Slinking towards it, Tony raised his hand. He had to throw caution away.

He blasted the safe with a repulsor blast and the glass cracked and broke away. Alarms went off in the Vault but Tony didn’t care. He reached for the Orb, pulling it closer to him. Did he have time to absorb the stone?

Do it.

The voice echoed in his head. He could already feel his chest tingling, feeling a bit warm from the proximity of the Power Stone.

Just twist it open.

Using the strength of his two Gauntlets on each hand, Tony twisted the Orb at the crevice going through the middle, breaking it open. The Power Stone floated in front of him. The nanonites retreated up his right arm and he reached out to take it—
“Give that to me!”

Tony whirled and saw Squidward behind him, reaching out towards the broken open Orb.

Without any further hesitation, Tony grasped the Infinity Stone in his bare hand.

He screamed.

Intense pain ran up his arm and his body was jerking uncontrollably. His chest was so hot, and through lidded eyes, he could see flashes of light as sparks jumped out from his palm. His right arm burned. And then he felt the Stone sinking into his skin, the pain running through his whole body before his legs gave way and he collapsed to the ground.

Breathing was hard. The last time he had felt so much pain was when he’d used the Infinity Stones themselves. There he had held it together before snapping his fingers and he suspected out of all the Stones, the Power Stone was the one which had caused irreversible damage to his body. His heart was pumping fast in his chest and he groaned as a booted foot rolled him over onto his back. He couldn’t move. The power to the suit was dead. The nanonites were not responding to his thought processes.

Slimy, slippery fingers grasped his chin and held his face tight.

“What did you do, human? Where is the Stone?”

Tony laughed. He couldn’t help it. There was no way Thanos was going to get the Stone now. “I don’t have it.”

“You had it!”

“Yeah, I did, but then it realised you were here and it magically disappeared!” retorted Tony, opening his eyes to see Squidward look down upon him angrily. He felt weak, dizzy even as if absorbing the Power Stone had completely drained him of all his strength.

“If you will not tell me then I will take you to someone who can force you.”

Shit.

The last thing Tony needed right now was to fall into the hands of Thanos. But his suit was not responding. The absorption of the Power Stone seemed to have short-circuited the Arc Reactor and his suit was dead. Unable to retract the nanonites, he had become a prisoner inside his own suit.

He felt himself being levitated into the air.

No. No! This can’t be happening!

He couldn’t move in his suit. And he tried, kept on trying regardless of the lack of movement.

A cold hand touched his cheek and he tried to pull away. But he still felt weak.

“Whatever you did with the Stone, we will pry it from your mind with ease.”

Tony was about to reply when Squidward went flying and Tony fell to the ground. Pepper was by his side in an instant as Wanda moved past, red waves of magic erupting from her fingers as she fought against Tony’s captor.

“Come on,” Pepper hissed. “You got it, right?”
Tony nodded. “I did. My suit is dead. I can barely move. The Stone must have short-circuited the Arc Reactor. It won’t retract the nanonites. The joints have all fused together,”

“That complicates things,” breathed Pepper. “You’re too heavy for me to lift, even in this suit.”

“What’s Nat?” Tony asked.

“She went to help Steve and the others. The other attacker fled back out into the city,” explained Pepper. “She told us you needed help and that we were the better two to stay.”

Tony cursed.

There was a scream and Wanda came flying back, her spine impacting against the wall. She got to her feet, wincing in pain.

“GIVE ME THE STONE!”

Squidward was back, his eyes shining menacingly as he attacked Wanda with ease, using his telepathic powers to send her flying across the room.

Yet Wanda wasn’t giving up. “You will not have him!” Tendrils of red erupted from her fingertips and she threw him back again.

“Wanda! Tony can’t move! His suit is dead!” Pepper shouted out.

Wanda barely acknowledged but she twisted her left hand and Tony felt himself levitating into the air again. “Take him. Get him away from here. I will hold the connection for as long as I can.” Wanda stood firm against her attacker, her eyes shining slightly red as she allowed her power to course through her body.

Pepper grasped Tony’s shoulders. “I can move you.” Engaging her thrusters, she began to push Tony out of the Vault.

“We can’t leave her!” hissed Tony, trying to move but was still unable to do so.

“We have to!” Pepper ignored Tony’s protests. “She’ll be fine. But you are completely defenceless whilst your suit is dead.” The helmet retracted over her lovely face. “And I’m getting you out of here to safety, Tony.”

He couldn’t argue with her. He was now effectively useless in the fight. Wanda was powerful and determined enough to stop Squidward from chasing them but the fact she was still keeping him levitated showed how powerful she really was. He knew she was going to be exhausted after this.

“Can you put the call through?” asked Tony. “I’ve got the Stone. We can retreat. I’m sure the Black Order will retreat too… They know the Stone is gone.”

“Did they see what you did?”

Tony wasn’t sure. “No, but they know I have it. We need to get out of here before magic guy alerts the others.” He was sure there would be complications to Squidward partially witnessing what he’d done but he couldn’t change the outcome now.

All they had to do was try to stay one step ahead of Thanos, otherwise, they would fail.
Somewhere in Space

On-board the Benatar

“That didn’t go well.” Tony was now out of the suit, having had it cut off him since they were unable to repair the Arc Reactor without removing the suit first. He was in the process of resetting it and restoring as many of the nanonites as possible.

“We got what we came for,” said Quill. “We retreated as soon as Pepper’s call came through.”

“And leaving the Nova Corps to deal with the rest of the Black Order,” stated Tony. He didn’t feel much like a hero leaving a population to deal with Thanos’ children.

“They retreated as well,” said Wanda, walking into the medbay. “The one who attacked you put the call through for the others to retreat as they had failed. I couldn’t stop him from escaping either…” She looked regretful. “Tony… did they see?”

Tony winced. “Partially.”

“That’s bad.”

“What’s bad?” asked Steve. He was bruised and had several cuts on his face and arms having got on the wrong side of one of Gamora’s adoptive brothers during the battle in the city. They’d smoothed some healing paste onto his skin to induce faster healing though Steve had been insistent his own cells didn’t need the extra boost.

Tony shifted in his chair and glanced at Natasha, who was leaning against the wall, her arms folded across her chest. “They saw.”

“Saw what?” Steve pressed. Out of the people currently present only Steve didn’t know that Tony was absorbing the Stones.

“We’re not destroying the Stones, Steve,” admitted Tony quietly. “We’re collecting them. I can… absorb them. A simple touch and they seem to merge with me.”

Steve blinked. “Right. Is this something to do with –” He noticed Natasha shaking her head. He pointed towards Quill and Gamora. “They don’t know?”

“Not yet,” replied Natasha quietly.

“Yeah, and we would like to know what is going on!” Quill retorted angrily.

“Peter…” Gamora laid a hand on his shoulder. “We promised them we would wait.”

“Until after they got the two Stones and now they have them!” Quill argued back. Gamora relented.

Tony shrugged. “It’s fine. You might not believe it. Nat and I are from the future, a future where Thanos won. We’re trying to stop it from happening.” He wasn’t going to explain to the Guardians they had ultimately won in that future at the cost of his and Natasha’s lives. They didn’t really need to know that. “Both Nat and I went to sleep one night and then woke up back in the past. We can’t explain what happened or why, just got to adapt to the situation and work around it.”

“That is the most ridiculous explanation I have ever heard!” Quill threw his arms up in the air. “Come on, the real truth.”
Wanda stepped forward, her eyes narrowing. “It’s the truth.”

Natasha uncrossed her arms. “Ever since we came back, Tony has been able to absorb the Stones. We don’t know why. He has four. There are two left. Thanos cannot get a hold of any of them. But there is one that Gamora can take us to.”

Quill looked baffled. “Really?”

“I can,” admitted Gamora.

“We need the Soul Stone,” beseeched Natasha. “We know it is on Vormir but we do not have the galactic coordinates. If Thanos learns of what Tony is doing – and there is no doubt that he will now know – we have to get the Soul Stone. The only way for us to save this future is to collect them all. Without Soul, we will fail.”

Gamora lowered her head, her hair falling about her shoulders. “Thanos will stop at nothing to get what he desires.” She glanced at Tony. “He already knows you, Stark. You took out his army. He sees you as an enemy. One to watch.”

“But will you help us?” asked Pepper quietly, moving into the conversation.

Gamora’s hands hung loosely at her side. A tiny nod of her chin was all the confirmation they needed. “I’ll take you to Vormir.”

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Chitauri Space

Sanctuary II

“You failed me. All of you.” Thanos swept his gaze across his children as they bowed before him, remiss in their failure to acquire the Power Stone.

“We will accept any punishment you bestow upon us, father,” decreed his daughter, Proxima.

He hadn’t truly been expecting them to succeed yet Ebony Maw had been seconds away from retrieving it before he’d been stopped by a human: a human who had somehow taken the Stone and hidden it.

The image of the human hovered in the centre of the room. Maw had provided the image of the human from his own memory, allowing Thanos to scour his mind to see what exactly had happened.

A human had held the Power Stone and lived.

It wasn’t the first time it had happened either. His daughter, Gamora, and her little gang had held the Power Stone too and prevented Ronan from using it to destroy Xandar. But this event, what Ebony Maw had witnessed was very different from the one Gamora had been involved in.

But this human intrigued him, what with his suit of armour and his uncanny ability to stand in Thanos’ way and wreck his plans. No, it was time for him to act upon this threat.

“Tony Stark…” he murmured. He’d made sure to learn the identity of the human who had destroyed his army before. It seemed they were destined to face one another. But Thanos wasn’t going to face him on Stark’s terms. “He has become a problem. A problem I want to be solved.”
Thanos turned his gaze back to his four children. “Track him. Monitor him and keep your distance. They’ll return to Earth soon.”

“Do you wish for us to bring him to you?” Ebony Maw enquired, keeping his head bowed and his fingers pressed together.

“No. Not yet. He will die by my hand once he has told me where he has put the Power Stone. We have to be cautious. I want to learn more before Tony Stark is brought to me.”

Thanos focused upon the visage of Tony, shimmering in the air in front of him. A slight smile tugged at his lips. “Stark is already mine. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

So, Thanos wasn't supposed to appear in this story just yet but his first appearance has been moved up to this chapter, just because it felt right to do so. Plus, he's got his eye on Tony which is the one thing Tony and Nat didn't want. Tony had no choice in absorbing the Power Stone when he did. It is now a race against time... Especially because Thanos is intent on getting hold of Tony... We don't want him to capture Tony, do we? *whistles innocently*

I do not think the Xandarians would easily give up the Power Stone. They believed they were powerful enough to keep it from anyone stealing it. Ultimately, in Infinity War they failed and Thanos took it first. Even though Thanos didn't take it until 2018, I could see him sending his children in a few attempts to steal it before getting fed up with their failures and going in himself. Unfortunately for Thanos in this case, Tony was already there.

The intensity of the Power Stone itself and how it disabled Tony. It's the most destructive Infinity Stone I think. Absorbing it caused Tony's Arc Reactor to short-circuit and his suit lose all power so he was effectively stuck in a suit he couldn't command.

And, I realised when writing this chapter that Tony never learned Ebony Maw's name. He just referred to him as Squidward, which is why in this chapter, as it is written in Tony's POV, that Maw is referred to as Squidward.

Quill and Gamora getting the time-travel explanation for Tony and Natasha - that conversation will be expanded on in a later chapter, as even Gamora recognises they are running out of time if they want to stop Thanos.

Next chapter: The Soul Stone. I'm saying nothing about this chapter. :D Will be posted next Sunday 12th January 2020.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Soul Stone

Chapter Summary

Vormir and the Soul Stone

Chapter Notes

Hello! I know this is chapter everyone has been waiting nervously for… I’m honestly nervous to publish it!

Please read to the end of the chapter…

And, please be mindful there is an illustration by my wonderful artist, JediPanda22, inserted midway into the chapter. I thought it was better to be put there than at the end…

Please do enjoy…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Soul Stone

Thursday 4th May 2017

Edges of Vormir Space

It took them just over two weeks to navigate their way to Vormir. It was deep in Celestial space and they couldn’t simply use jump points to reach it. Gamora had explained she had been tasked in locating the Soul Stone. It had taken her several years to find all the clues and piece them together to unearth the map that led to Vormir.

It was a forgotten world, one that had once had held life upon its surface, now it was a barren world, completely devoid of life and she had learned atop its highest peak the Soul Stone resided. Gamora had taken the map, memorised its co-ordinates and then burnt the map to ash, telling no one of her discovery and informing Thanos of her failure.

They had been able to use a few jump points but had spent most of the time using their own speed and navigation to reach the edge of the system Vormir resided in.

Both Tony and Natasha had avoided talking about what they would do when it came to Vormir but as it became evident they would reach the planet in a matter of hours both of them knew they had to discuss how they were going to retrieve the Soul Stone.

They had requested time to talk with one another and Gamora had once again agreed to allow them
into her quarters for them to discuss privately. Those that knew they were from the future realised what they wanted to talk about.

Tony leaned back against the door as Nat sat on the bed.

“Well…” he began quietly. “We’ll be reaching Vormir soon…”

“And there lies the problem…” Natasha raised her eyes. “It has to be me, Tony.”

“No. You can’t,” Tony replied, insistent.

“Who else can it be?” she pointed out. “The Stone needs a sacrifice. It’s not Pepper. You forfeit your entire future with her and Morgan and I know you would never be able to kill her. You wouldn’t be able to live with yourself. And I wouldn’t allow it.” She leaned forward. “It’s not Steve either. He’s tied up in something else…”

Tony winced. “Steve wouldn’t hesitate if he knew.”

“He wouldn’t.” A slight smile tugged at her lips.

“But it is not meant to be him,” said Natasha quietly. “I know it is meant to be me, Tony. You need the Stone to absorb and we’re in this together. You have to sacrifice me.”

Tony grabbed her by the shoulder. “I can’t do that! I refuse to believe you’ve been sent back just so you can die again!”

“Tony…” She smiled gently, taking his hand in hers. “I have the ability to link to you, to find you. We have a connection that is linked to the properties of an Infinity Stone. Sacrificing someone else isn’t going to work. My heart tells me it is the right thing to do.”

“You’re not going to let me say no, are you?”

She shook her head. “No.” She pressed a hand on his chest. “The most important thing is for you to collect all the Stones. You need them.”

“Does it matter if I don’t get them all?”

“Trying to get out of it, I see…” she said wistfully.

“No. I just do not want to see you die.” It was the honest truth. He closed his eyes, his heart beating slightly faster in his chest as he considered what he would have to lose to get the Stone. “It doesn’t make sense…”

“I thought it would come to this…” she explained quietly. “The voice has told you the time when Morgan was conceived, right?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah.” He still remembered the time and date which had been told to him when he’d first thought of her when he’d woken up here after dying. “Sixteenth September, 2018 at eleven twenty PM.”

“Why tell you that if whatever brought us back doesn’t intend for you to have her?”

“To give me hope? To give me something to fight for?” suggested Tony.

“No… I think she’s meant to exist. That knowledge alone rules out Pepper being the sacrifice. And Steve? Don’t you feel it? Something is telling me it is my time, not Steve’s. We’re in this together,
Tony, until the end. I think Steve is meant to take my place beside you.” She squeezed his hand as he moved to sit next to her. “I’m okay with this.”

Tony lowered his gaze. “I think you are wrong.” He placed a hand on his chest. “I feel you’re meant to be here. Steve has to make a sacrifice.” He didn’t know why he said that but the feeling of Steve sacrificing himself seemed to resonate with him. Yet if Steve wasn’t going to be the sacrifice for the Soul Stone, what sacrifice would he make later on?

“But not today,” she replied quietly. “Today is my turn. And you cannot convince me otherwise either.”

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Friday 5th May 2017

Vormir

By the time they reached the planet, the day had ticked over into Friday.

Tony hadn’t tried to convince her after she had made it clear she would not allow anyone else to take her place on Vormir. She knew he wanted to though. Both of them were stubborn, it wasn’t something either of them could deny.

Natasha didn’t make a show of saying goodbye to everyone before they left the Benatar. Tony had left it up to her to explain that they knew they wouldn’t need anyone else to accompany them and that they’d return once they had retrieved the Stone.

She did give Steve a hug before she left, whispering in his ear to ‘lookout for Tony’ beforeshouldering her pack and departing from the ship with Tony in tow.

They were silent as they crossed the plains towards the highest peak. The sky was gloomy and a cold breeze whisked through the air. Natasha led the way with Tony trailing behind her. He wore his suit though the mask was down.

As they reached the pathway that led up to the peak, Natasha paused and turned to look at Tony.

“Don’t hate me for this.”

“This is wrong and you know it,” he retorted.

But she couldn’t. She had to be the one to die. Her link to the Soul Stone proved that. Part of the Stone had to be within her. For Tony to be able to get it, she had to die. Why couldn’t he see that? It didn’t help that her heart believed it was the right path to take. *I don’t want to die either but if it is the only option…*

Tony walked past her. “I’m not eager to push you off a cliff to your death.”

“Neither am I.”

“Then why volunteer? Again?” He was already walking up the path.

“Tony! Wait!” She ran up after him, managing to duck around in front of him and stop his progress. “Can’t you see why it has to be me?”

He narrowed his gaze waiting for her explanation.
“I have some affinity for the Soul Stone inside me. A part of it has to be in me, otherwise, why do I have Soul Stone powers?”

Tony’s lips twitched. “You’re saying to release it you have to die, otherwise for anyone else it wouldn’t work, not even if it was Pepper standing here instead of you?”

Natasha nodded. “Yes.” She reached out and took his hand covered in armour, grasping the Gauntlet tightly. “That’s why it has to be me. I know you don’t want to do this to me, Clint didn’t either. I wanted him to go back to his family. I made sure he had to let me go.” With her other hand, she reached for the Arc Reactor shining in the centre of his chest. “You were given these powers for a reason. I think if I wasn’t meant to die here, the Voice we hear would be telling us differently.”

Tony bowed his head. He knew she was right but didn’t want to vocally admit it.

The wind buffeted in her hair. She hadn’t tied it back, and she smiled lightly. “Come on. Sometimes we have to make difficult choices and this is one of them.”

She didn’t let go of his hand, and she led him up the top of the mountain.

---

The robed figure was waiting for them, just like before. He was floating slightly off the ground, his black robes swaying gently in the breeze.

“Welcome, Natasha, daughter of Ivan and Anthony, son of Maria.”

Tony paused, shock flittering across his features. “He knows who we are.”

Natasha nodded. “He does. He’s the Guardian of the Soul Stone, helps those that come to seek for it.”

“By telling them they have to push someone to their deaths?” Tony rolled his eyes. He still sounded bitter and resentful over what he had to do.

“A necessary sacrifice if you are to obtain the Soul Stone.” The robed figure moved closer to them, his face briefly seen underneath the hood.

Tony stepped back, raising his arm and pointing at the figure. “Nat, do you know who that is?”

“No? You do?” Natasha was surprised.

“That’s the Red Skull.”

“Wait. Steve’s Red Skull?” Natasha blinked. “It can’t be…” Why hadn’t she recognised him before? She’d seen photos of him in the SHIELD bunker when she’d been there with Steve during the Winter Soldier crisis. “I didn’t recognise him before…”

“I was once the Red Skull. I tried to take a Stone for myself. Instead, it banished me here and set me to work as the Guardian. I no longer seek what I once desired. This is my penance,” the figure repeated. “The being who I once was no longer exists… I am just a shell of what he once was.”

Tony frowned. “So, if someone mentioned the name Steve Rogers or Captain America to you, you wouldn’t want to get more information out of them? You are here because of him.”

“Why are you deliberately trying to bait him?” hissed Natasha, rolling her eyes.
“I’m not,” he whispered back.

“I hold no ill-will for Captain America. If we crossed paths again I wouldn’t attempt to hurt him.”

Tony looked like he was about to retort but Natasha glared at him. They were here for one specific reason.

The being floated closer. “You already know how to obtain the Soul Stone. A sacrifice is needed. But do you have the strength to do it?”

Tony clenched his fists tight, his eyes narrowing.

Natasha turned to face him, noticing his expression. “Tony…”

“I know.” She slid the pack she wore off her shoulders and handed it to Tony. “I bought this because there are things in there that I want you to pass to the others.”

His lips twitched. “Okay.” He didn’t like this. She could see it.

She took a deep breath. She could have given it to him back at the Benatar but she hadn’t wanted anyone to come across it. She was sure no one would have looked in it without permission but she hadn’t wanted to take the chance.

Natasha glanced over the edge. The last time she was here, she and Clint had fought to be the one to sacrifice themselves. This time it would be different. The wind buffeted around her and she faced back towards Tony who was slowly moving forward, his body trembling within the confines of the suit.

Her arms hung loosely at her side and she watched Tony.

He stopped in front of her.

“I can’t do this,” he whispered quietly.

“Yes, you can,” she urged. She could walk backward off the edge but something told her Tony had to be the one to push her off.

“I can hear them,” he said. “The Voice. It’s telling me to do it… To kill you…”

He wouldn’t be able to have the strength. He was fighting the demand he was hearing in his head from the Voice, a demand she was not partial to hearing.

Reaching out, Natasha drew him into a hug. They’d been through so much together and for it to end like this was painful. She rested her head against his shoulder. “It’s the only way. Whatever it takes.”

Tony reciprocated and wrapped his arms around her body, resting his cheek on the top of her head. He was trying not to sniff and his body was slightly trembling in the cold air.

Drawing back, Natasha took hold of his right hand and placed it on her chest, bending his fingers to grasp her overalls.

“Tony, push me back,” said Natasha, leaning back over the cliff edge.

Tony’s hand was on her overalls. His eyes were shimmering with tears. He didn’t want to do this. She could see it.
Still, she urged him on.

“You can do this. I know you can.” She smiled wistfully and leaned back further, arms hanging loose at her sides. “Enjoy your life, Tony. Remember me.” A tear fell down her cheek. “Goodbye.”

Her heels teetered at the edge of the cliff. The wind whipped her hair around her and then Tony pushed her off the cliff and she was falling, falling, falling…

Tony was leaning over the edge reaching for her, yelling her name as she fell.

And then everything went dark.
He saw the moment her body hit the floor below, saw the moment her body broke in half and her skull shatter.

“Oh god… I did it… I did it…” There was blood on his hands.

Natasha’s blood.

He’d killed her.
Taken her life.

He didn’t register the thunderous clap of thunder overhead or the flash of white light obscuring his vision before he found himself kneeling in water, his suit having retracted into the Arc Reactor on his chest.

There was something in his palm.

Tears still streaking down his face to mingle with his beard, he uncurled his right hand to see the Soul Stone sitting on his palm.

He had it.

But it wasn’t sinking into his palm. It wasn’t merging with him. Had they done the wrong thing? Had he sacrificed Natasha for no reason?

And that was when a slender hand moved into his line of vision and covered the Stone which sat in his palm.

“Hey, Tony.”

He looked up and saw –

The last thing she expected was to open her eyes again.

She was lying in water though she could not feel anything. As she rose to a sitting position, Natasha looked around her. The sky above her was purplish and dull all at the same time. Why wasn’t she wet? As she turned her gaze around she saw Tony, kneeling in the water, his palm open and the Soul Stone rested upon it.

Getting to her feet, Natasha moved over towards him. “Hey, Tony.”

He didn’t answer.

Nor did he move.

“Tony?” She tried again.

And that was when she noticed she was transparent.

“Oh.” Raising her hand, Natasha realised she could see through it. She waved her arm in front of his face. There was still no reaction from Tony.

“He will not react. He is frozen in time.”

Natasha whirled, getting into a defensive stance. In front of her shimmered a woman, also in the same transparent state Natasha was in. She had longish hair trailing down her back and a dress hanging down around her ankles. She was barefoot.

“Who are you?” Natasha breathed. Could she breathe if she was dead?

The woman smiled gently. “No fear, Natasha Romanoff, I am Soul.”

Natasha straightened, her eyes crinkling in confusion. “What do you mean?”
“I am the physical essence of Soul. The soul of the Stone you have now given your life twice for.”

Natasha moved forward slowly. “Why am I here?” She glanced back at the immovable figure of Tony, the Soul Stone lying in the palm of his hand. “Why is he frozen in time? Why have you done this?”

“I haven’t done this,” explained Soul. “My brother has.”

“Your brother?” Confusion kept on creeping up on her.

The woman pointed towards Tony. “Watch.”

Natasha turned her attention towards Tony, who was still completely still, unaware of what was going on around him. That was when she saw the faint glimmer of green surrounding his body. Realisation struck. “Time!” She whirled back around. “Time is your brother?”

The woman bowed her chin slightly. “We are all brothers and sisters.”

“The Stones… Power, Space, Time, Reality, Soul and Mind… You’re siblings…”

“Yes, we are. Born at the same time, before the beginning of the universe, we were just singularities but formed into Infinity Stones once the universe exploded into existence. We are the foundations of which the universe was created and we are all in tune with one another. We are a family.”

“All of you… The voice we hear. It’s all of you, isn’t it?” Natasha asked. “All six stones combined into one voice.”

Soul smiled. “Yes.”


“We all sent you back not just my brother.”

“But I’m dead again. I died,” she pointed out, wondering how Soul would react to that.

A bright smile crossed Soul’s features. “No, you are not dead.”

“But I don’t have a body.” She waved at her translucent appearance. “I’m physically dead.”

“Your body is but your soul isn’t. A soul can only die once.”

Natasha blinked. “But I’ve died twice.” If she wasn’t dead and she didn’t have a body was she truly alive?

“As I said, you are not dead.”

“And what do you mean a soul can only die once?”

“You cannot physically leave this world, Natasha Romanoff. The world of the dead will not accept your soul.”

She was still confused as to what Soul was saying.

“Your body died but your soul left it when it broke. You are on a different plane to the rest of the universe. But you can return and live again.”
“I get a third chance?”

Soul pointed towards Tony. “When we brought you both back and decided to interfere in the universe, we bent the rules. People who die cannot be reborn. We stopped your souls from moving on, took them and sent them back but we also gave you, Natasha, a choice and you chose to come back. Tony Stark did not have a choice… Your souls can no longer move to the great beyond. The Goddess of Death will not accept them.”

Natasha was beginning to understand. “Are you saying, Tony and I, we are immortal?”

“Yes, Natasha Romanoff. Your bodies can be destroyed but your souls cannot be.”

Natasha swallowed, the implications becoming clearer to her. “And what happens when our bodies are destroyed? What happens to our souls if we cannot move to the beyond?”

“Your souls will drift out in the universe forever…”

“That doesn’t sound like… fun…” Natasha looked at Tony. “But we are in human bodies. They age and decay.”

“You will not age. And we will fix your body for you to return to. Your task is not yet complete.”

Natasha wasn’t sure if she wanted Soul to continue but she continued with her questions. “What did you do to us when you bought us back?”

“We infused you both with our powers. Your souls had already moved on. It took a lot of energy to bring you both back. To do so it reversed the universe back to Earth year 2014, the year of your death. We chose to wake you up in 2014 and kept Tony Stark’s soul until 2016 when we sent his soul back to his body after he was changed. He doesn’t remember those two years of being with us.”

“What did you do to him?” Why did they keep Tony’s soul for another two years? “Why wasn’t he sent back at the same time as me?”

Soul moved in front of Tony’s still body, placing a translucent hand on his face, physically touching him. “He is special to us. We saw it when he used all six of us to save the entire universe. Such a selfless sacrifice, forfeiting a life with his wife and daughter, a life that he always wanted. But to use the powers we imbued him with we had to change his body, his DNA… He’s not fully human. Not like you. The memories of what we did to him are buried deep in his soul. We cannot remove them. But if he remembers…”

Natasha understood the complications of what Soul was saying.

“We hated making him scream.” Soul reminisced sadly. “But it was necessary.”

“You tortured him.”

“A human body cannot contain the power of six Infinity Stones. There are others who have been imbued with powers from just one of us… Carol Danvers from my brother, Space, and Wanda Maximoff from my sister, Mind. But they received just a small bit of universal energy, enough for their bodies to adapt. The same for you as well. You died for the Soul Stone, I am a part of you. Your body did not need changing. For Tony Stark to become what we wanted him to be, we had to tear his soul apart and imbue ourselves to it as well as to his body. It was the only way to ensure his human body could withstand our powers. He can never know what we did to him.”
“You can’t stop me telling him,” threatened Natasha. “You did this without his consent.”

“You agreed and chose this path when you were given the choice to return. Tony Stark did not have a choice. We chose him.”

Natasha remembered. She’d told Tony about being given the choice to return and she’d taken the chance to do so. “But you didn’t have to do that to me.”

Soul shook her head. “No. I infused within you the moment you died. I was already there. No alterations were necessary, for Tony Stark it was needed.”

“What happens if I tell him?” asked Natasha. She didn’t like how the Stones seemed to have given her a choice but not Tony.

“The memories could destroy him,” explained Soul sadly. “What we did was out of necessity to save his life and to save the universe.” She rose from where she sat in front of Tony and moved back to stand in front of Natasha. “He has incredible power at his disposal. He needs someone to ground him when it unleashes. That person is you. He needs you, Natasha Romanoff.”

She was about to comment when Soul spoke again, more softly this time, full of remorse.

“We know what is to come. He will suffer…”

“What do you mean?”

Soul reached out towards her, resting a hand upon Natasha’s forehead.

“What are you doing?” Natasha tried to pull away but found she could not.

“Showing you what you must know but what he cannot.”

Natasha’s eyes rolled. Images flashed before her mind.

Thanos.

Thanos grasping Tony by the neck and was pulling him through a portal.

Tony held in some sort of machine, his body shimmering with six different colours as Thanos watched on, a malevolent grin across his face.

Thanos with the power of all six Stones…

And the universe disappeared.

Natasha pulled away. “Stop it! Why did you show me that?” she demanded angrily.

“Because it is the future. A future you must prevent.”

“He got the Stones… how did Thanos get the Stones?” Natasha tried to grasp Soul but her hands went straight through her.

Soul turned her head towards Tony. “There are ways to extract us from Tony for others to use… if the right equipment is utilised. But, and this is important, you must let Thanos take Tony.”

“No, no, no. No way. Not happening.” Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “Not if that means Thanos can extract the Stones from Tony! We’re supposed to stop him, not hand the
universe to him served up on a plate!"

“You will not be able to stop Thanos from taking the Space Stone. He will use it to take Tony from right in front of you. It is the only way for Tony to get the last of us to unleash his powers.”

Natasha couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Tony had to be taken by Thanos for him to get the Space Stone? The last Stone they needed? “There has to be another way to get the Space Stone before Thanos does,” she reasoned. “We have time! If we can get to Asgard –”

Soul interrupted. “The way to Asgard is blocked to you. Asgard will fall.”

“No. Thor lost his home and half his people! I’m not going to let him lose them this time!” she snarled. “I can’t keep this a secret!”

Soul tipped her head to the side, almost a gesture of regret. “I am sorry. It is the only way. Thanos is already seeking Tony and he will get him.” She moved back, her hair flying out behind her. “And now, Natasha Romanoff, it is time for you to return. Look after him. He needs you…”

Natasha reached out, yelling for Soul to stay, to explain more, but a flash of light spread across her vision and suddenly she was moving her hand in front of Tony’s face and covering the Soul Stone sitting in his hand and she was speaking words she had no control over.

“Hey, Tony,” she smiled.

---

“Nat?” Tony breathed, hardly daring to believe what he was seeing. She was kneeling beside him, her slender fingers covering the Stone resting in his hand. “Natasha? What… what… What are you doing here? You…” He was dumbfounded. Was he seeing things? “You can’t be here…”

“I am,” she smiled. “I survived.”

“How?” he asked weakly.

Natasha hesitated, her hand still covering his. “The Voice again. I’m still needed apparently.”

“I thought…” His voice still sounded weak from surprise. “I saw you dead, Nat…”


His cheeks were wet but he didn’t care. Didn’t care he was crying. He pulled Natasha into a hug. “Never ever make me do that again!”

“Let’s hope there isn’t the next time.” Natasha lifted her hand from his. “The Soul Stone. It’s not merged with you…” She tipped her head to the side. “Why not?”

Tony sniffed. “I don’t know.”

The orange stone glowed brightly in his hand.

“I wonder…” Natasha reached out and touched the Soul Stone, and then laid her hand over Tony’s again so that their fingers paired up. Then she pressed down hard so that the Stone would have pierced through their flesh and made them bleed. They both flinched at the small spark of pain and then their joined hands glowed orange and then their arms.

Tony felt the warmth in his chest just as Natasha raised her own hand to hers in surprise at the
“Is this what it felt like to absorb them?” she asked.

Tony nodded. He pulled his hand away, the Soul Stone completely gone. “Yeah.”

“Strange,” she commented. She looked down at the water they were both kneeling in. “We’re a bit wet.”

Tony chuckled. “We just absorbed an Infinity Stone together and you are worried about being a bit wet?”

She glared at him.

Tony got to his feet and offered her his hand, pulling her up as she took it. “Come on. We’ve got to get back.”

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When they returned to the *Benatar*, Tony and Natasha explained they found the Stone easily, not letting anyone know what had happened between them. They didn’t need to know.

They decided they would begin their journey back to Earth where they would regroup with the other Avengers and then decide on what to do next. Though the Space Stone was still out there, Natasha knew from her discussion with Soul that they would be unable to retrieve it before Thanos got his hands upon it.

Much as she wanted to save Asgard and stop Thor from losing his people, it seemed the Infinity Stones had other plans. She assumed they were partially controlling their lives and the paths they were on. She guessed, even if they did find a way to reach Asgard, that they wouldn’t be able to retrieve the Space Stone.

Something would come up.

She hated the fact they’d have to wait for Thanos to make his move before attempting to retrieve the Stone.

*I don’t like the idea that Tony has to be taken by Thanos. How can I sit here knowing this?*

She understood why. Tony needed all six to unleash his powers. If he got all six… But something else nagged at her. Why had the Stones chosen Tony? What made them pick him out over everyone else in the universe to wield the Stones?

She wished she could talk to Soul again.

*I am in Gamora’s room.*

Gamora had once again been generous, allowing Natasha a bit of time to herself. She needed it after what had occurred on Vormir.

Just to be on the safe side, Natasha enabled the locking system, so no one could enter.

Leaning back on the bed, Natasha closed her eyes. She wondered if she’d be able to connect with her again. How was she to do it? She and Tony shared a connection after all, perhaps that was her answer? If the Stones could talk to them and had been guiding them all this time, surely there was a way for them to reach them?
To connect with Tony, she had to think about him but maybe if she focused somewhere else?

Inwardly, she looked at her heart, imagining it in her mind. *I want to speak to Soul.*

There was a slight vibration in the air around her as if a connection had been formed.

*What do you wish to know, Natasha Romanoff?* The Voice spoke.

Natasha opened her eyes. There was no one in the room with her. She’d connected with Soul inwardly. *I want to know why you picked Tony. If humans are incapable of mastering the power of the Stones without suffering catastrophic injuries, why did you pick him?*

Soul was silent.

*Tell me!* Natasha demanded. *I have a right to know! You want me to keep secrets from him about what you did to him. I cannot do that if I do not understand why out of everyone in the universe, you picked him!*

Surprisingly Soul answered: *He gave his life for a universe which did not appreciate or love him enough. He didn’t hesitate when he knew he had to die. Like you. Not many people would make the same sacrifices. Humans are considered weak in the universe and yet… you are some of the strongest species alive. Tony Stark loved his daughter so much that he was willing to give his own life to ensure she lived, even if it meant he would never see her again. He had the strength of will to overcome his human body and control us for a short amount of time. We chose him because of his strength and his love. Unlike Thanos who sacrificed his daughter for a better universe for himself, Tony Stark sacrificed himself, not just because he wanted his daughter to live, it was so everyone could live. He made the ultimate sacrifice. We could have let him rest… But we know he is worthy of us.*

There was a pause before Soul spoke again.

*And… he deserved a life with his family.*

Natasha swallowed. “You chose the right man. A lot of us misjudged him when we first met him. If I’d known what I do now about him, I would never have written the report not recommending Tony Stark to SHIELD. I’m glad you chose him… But not over what you had to do to him.” The little she had learned before, that they had to torture Tony in order to change him to what they needed him to be… She loathed it. She wished she didn’t know it.

*We regret it.*

Natasha opened her eyes, knowing she was still maintaining the connection. “Promise me one thing. When this is all over, you have to tell Tony what you did to him and you must promise to help him if the knowledge destroys him. If we are going to be immortal together, I can’t keep it a secret forever. It’s not fair on me.” She recognised the Stones had powers of their own. They could simply make them forget. They’d certainly made Tony forget. They’d sent her back to 2014, reversing the universe back to that time and yet had kept Tony’s soul and body to themselves as they worked to change him into what they required him to be.

*We will tell him.*

Natasha breathed out. *Promise?* She didn’t want to disbelieve Soul, though she got the feeling the others were partaking in this conversation as Soul had been using ‘we’ a lot.

*We do, Natasha Romanoff.*
The connection broke and Natasha blinked. A slight smile tinged at her lips. Thank you.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

I bet you all wanted to kill me when Tony pushed Natasha off the cliff, right? A few were expecting Steve to go… Steve has a large role to play later on. It will become clear.

I know a few were hoping Steve would meet the Red Skull, he won’t do, I’m sorry to disappoint those who were looking forward to it. He was never going to set foot on Vormir.

A lot of information was revealed in this chapter… The Voice Tony and Nat hear are the six Infinity Stones – I think a few of you had already guessed that. And they are meddling with the universe.

I’m sure there may be questions about what is revealed in this chapter, especially the whole concept of what the sentience of the Stones are doing, what they did to bring Tony and Nat back and what they’ve had to do to Tony specifically so he could have access to their powers and his human body not be destroyed by them. A lot of these questions will be clarified throughout the story. And the whole Souls thing… This story is named Old Souls for a reason! :D

As for what Natasha learned from Soul... Tony has yet to learn about it... This will be addressed in the next chapter.

I hope the ideas presented in this chapter are good and intrigue you all. If I can answer any questions about them without spoiling the rest of the story I will try my best to do so!

Next chapter: The Wedding to be posted Sunday 19th January 2020.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Wedding

Chapter Summary

Tony and Nat return to Earth and a Wedding happens...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Apologies for updating slightly later than I usually do. I only finished this chapter thirty minutes ago! Had a busy week!

**Warning:** There is a sex scene in this chapter. I debated including it but decided to in the end. If you do not want to read it, avoid the scene from when it says 'Wedding Suite' at the start of the scene. At present, this will be the only time sex will be included in this fic :)

Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

The Wedding

**Wednesday 7th June 2017**

They arrived back on Earth four weeks after they had departed Vormir. The journey back had been slightly more perilous than before. They had been unable to use the same space lanes to get to Vormir to leave the system, meaning they had to navigate around the dangerous pathways to determine the best route out.

Despite Steve’s best attempts to find out what had happened on Vormir – an event neither Tony nor Natasha wished to elaborate on – he was refused all attempts. They had, however, agreed to bring everyone together when they arrived on Earth and explain everything to them, including Rhodey and Happy, two people who Tony wanted to bring into his confidence.

“I’m worried people may not so readily believe us,” said Natasha quietly. They stood at the back of the hold. “How much do we tell them?”

“Don’t tell them we died,” advised Tony. “The people who need to know already do. Keep to the story that we come from a future where Thanos won and we woke up here.”

“Though technically,” she pointed out, “Thanos did lose in the end. You beat him.”

Tony shook his head. “No. We did. I wouldn’t have been able to snap my fingers without you
“sacrificing your life for the Soul Stone.”

Natasha lowered her gaze. “Maybe not… We’re going to have a lot of questions directed at us.”

“There may be a way to make it easier on us… For them to believe us,” considered Tony, frowning slightly. “Just a thought though…”

“What is it?”

“Mantis. She’s an Empath. She can read feelings… If everyone allows her to read their feelings before we tell them the truth, she can then read our feelings afterwards… It might help them believe us. We’ve been lucky the people who do know the truth haven’t needed much convincing…” suggested Tony. “What do you think?”

“Good suggestion. One we could use. There is one other thing we need to discuss,” she began.

“The Space Stone and Asgard?” he guessed.

She nodded slightly. “I don’t think we are meant to get it before Thanos does.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “We have to.” He couldn’t conceive the notion of Thanos having any chance of getting any of the Stones.

“Then how do we get there?” she pointed out.

Tony paused, frowning slightly. It had been bothering him for a while. How could they get to Asgard? “We need Thor.”

“We do but we cannot contact him,” continued Natasha. She shifted on her feet, her eyes moving slightly.

Tony noticed the small perceptive movements. “Nat… what do you know?”

“What makes you believe I know something you don’t?”

Tony laughed gently. “You’ve been a bit jittery the whole journey home. Not enough for the others to notice but I know you. Something is up. Plus, I have a little niggle at the back of my head which seems to be resonating from you.”

“Oh…” She paused, clearly not expecting Tony’s admittance. “Our link…” she reasoned. She hadn’t thought to check but their link was stronger than before. “It’s stronger. But… you said before, after Ross kidnapped you, that you couldn’t connect with me. The connection wasn’t active on your end.”

Tony grimaced. “It is now. I can sense you, reach out to you. I know you’re hiding something from me.” He shrugged. “I’d hoped you might tell me about it but you haven’t. I can only assume…”

She cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “You’re not meant to know.”

“Am I not?” he reasoned.

*No, you are not.*

“Ah, the voice is back. I do not appreciate it when things are kept from me.” He caught her gaze.
Natasha looked guilty. “They stopped me changing anything for two years. They can prevent me from telling you to. You know that.”

Unfortunately, he did. If the voice was manipulating everything then he and Natasha were just pawns in a far larger game, not really maintaining free will of their own, despite it seeming like it was. Tony sighed. “You died on Vormir, Nat. I think you’ve had a nice chat with the voice before they brought you back again. Why?”

Because she needed to know the information you cannot learn yet. The fate of the universe depends upon you, Tony Stark.

Natasha was watching his reaction carefully. Clearly, what had echoed in Tony’s mind she had been partial to as well.

“Will I ever learn it?” he asked. He hated being kept in the dark but this was one problem his mind couldn’t solve. He chose to ignore the idea that the fate of the universe depended upon him.

We do not control you. Every action you have taken is of your own free will. We only intervene when it is necessary. We guide you. It is necessary for you to do not know. But, you will know soon.

Natasha bowed her head. “I’m sorry, Tony. I don’t want to keep secrets but we both know how this works. If you know it won’t happen.”

“Exactly what Strange said to me when I asked him before I died,” admitted Tony.

“Would you have done it if you’d known?”

Tony had to be truthful. “I think I would have tried to stay away from Thanos as far away as possible in the hope someone else would use the Stones… But, I like to believe I still would have done it.” It was hard to admit one's faults.

“Even when you knew you still did it,” she pointed out.

Tony nodded. “I could have let the universe burn even then but I didn’t. I think if I’d known earlier I may have tried to circumvent fate, try to find another way… thereby ruining everything.”

“Tony… what I know is to try and protect you. Whatever comes, whatever happens, I will always be by your side. That’s all I can say. Usually, I’m quite good at keeping secrets. Clearly our link is proving problematic in that department.”

“Might come in use later though,” he pointed out.

“Might do.” Natasha reached out towards him. “I’m sorry, Tony. If I could tell you, I would, but it is better you don’t know. At least not yet. Once Thanos makes his move, things may become clearer.”

Despite Tony’s annoyance at being left out of what Natasha knew, he recognised he had no choice and it was better to get on with it rather than mope about what he didn’t know.

And yet the bad feeling would not go away, no matter how much he tried.

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**Avengers Facility**

They gathered everyone together in the Conference Room. Tony and Natasha stood in front of the
“We’ve called you all here today for a reason,” began Tony. “As you all know we left Earth on the 7th April, two months ago, to embark on a mission which could help us prevent a wider threat. Only a select few people knew of this threat and to prevent panic from becoming widespread we elected not to tell any of you of this.” He cast his gaze around the table, looking at Rhodey, Happy (who Tony had invited because he wanted his long-term friend to know the truth and it was better to tell them all now than keep on repeating himself), Sam, Vision, Clint, Peter Parker, and the other members of the Guardians, Drax, Rocket, Groot, and Mantis. “There is a threat coming to Earth, which doesn’t involve just us, it involves the entire universe.”

“And what is this threat?” asked Sam quietly.

“His name is Thanos. He wants to collect six stones in order to wipe out half the universe’s population. What Natasha and I have been doing, and what we did whilst in space, was to retrieve five of the six stones. They are known as Infinity Stones, the most powerful objects in existence. Small but with so much power,” explained Tony.

The others who already knew the truth hadn’t arrived for the meeting, though Quill and Gamora had decided to stay within the room to manage their teammates. After the truth was out they planned to leave the planet.

“They are very dangerous objects,” added Natasha. “If Thanos gets a hold of them, life as we know it can change with a snap of the fingers.” She helped up her hand and clicked her fingers. “Just like that.”

“But that is not all,” continued Tony, his shoulders visibly dropping. “Those that are not here already know this and accept the truth of what we’ve told them, however, what we next have to reveal may be difficult for you to believe. Therefore, we have devised a way for our truth to be accepted by you all.”

“What do you mean?” Rhodey asked, watching carefully.

“It means we do not expect you to believe this,” said Natasha. She glanced at Quill and Gamora. “I know the two standing in this room who know still struggle to believe it.”

Tony sighed. “Nat and I… we’re from the future. From the year 2023, five years after Thanos won.”

They’d expected uproar but all they got was open mouths and surprised glances between their comrades.

Rocket was the one who burst out laughing, as well as Drax. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” yelled the Racoon, slapping his paws on his short legs.

“It’s impossible to travel in time!” roared Drax, slapping his hands against the table.

“I am Groot!”

Rhodey leaned forward, head in his hands. “What was I drinking last night?”

“Nat, why are you going along with this?” asked Clint, surprise flickering across his face.

“Impossible.” Sam shook his head.
Vision merely stood from his chair. “It makes sense.”

“How?” Peter Parker stammered. “How can it? Time travel is impossible!”

Tony chuckled. “No, it isn’t.”

Natasha leaned back against the wall, arms across her chest. “It wasn’t time travel that we physically came back… It’s… We went to sleep in 2023 and woke up here.”

“Strictly speaking we’ve been here for a year,” confirmed Tony. He hadn’t wanted to complicate things by revealing Natasha had been here longer than him. “Since then we’ve been trying to ensure the future we came from does not happen. Getting the Stones was just a small part of that. Thanos is still going to come here. We cannot stop him.”

“Pepper, Steve, Wanda, and Fury have all known for a while,” admitted Natasha. “We decided to keep this as quiet as possible which was why the rest of you were kept in the dark. Events have spiralled out of our control which has necessitated in us needing to reveal things to you all.”

“What things?” asked Happy.

“We haven’t just been collecting the Stones…” Tony began. “For some reason since we were sent back, each time I’ve touched a Stone, I’ve been able to absorb it into me… which shouldn’t happen. We’re telling you this because it was witnessed by Quill and Gamora during our journey to retrieve one of them.”

“Is it bad Tony can absorb them?” queried Clint.

“It could be if Thanos ever finds out Tony is the one who absorbed them,” stated Natasha. “We did face the Black Order whilst retrieving one of them…”

“They know I took a Stone but not what I did with it,” said Tony. “If anything, if Thanos comes to Earth…”

“You’ll be his target,” said Rhodey.

Tony nodded. “I will be.”

Natasha clapped her hands together. “Some of you may still disbelieve our story. We haven’t exactly offered you proper proof.”

Clint leaned back in his chair. “You haven’t. But you are very convincing.”

Natasha smiled warmly at him, grateful for his belief. “However to ensure that you can fully trust us, we would like Mantis to read your feelings. She is an empath. Once she has proven to you all that she can read your feelings, she will then read ours and we hope this will ascertain the truth of what we say.”

“That is if you are all happy with an empath reading your feelings…” pointed out Tony, “but it’s the only way we can think of which would provide accurate results.”

“You could always project falsehoods though,” said Vision.

“We could but she is able to read what lies within. If we attempt to lie then she will still be able to pick apart any lies we have told,” explained Tony.

Quill raised his hand. “This is true. I tried to hide my true feelings for Gamora when we first met
Mantis… She saw beneath any falsehoods I tried to portray. I trust Mantis to get to the bottom of this.”

Everyone around the table reluctantly nodded.

Tony clapped his hands together. “Now, who would like to go first?”

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Mantis had gone through everyone, proving that she could read the truth in feelings, even if they attempted to trick her. It was enough to convince the others that if she tried to read Tony and Natasha and she stated they spoke the truth, they would believe them.

Tony decided to go first, sitting in front of his other team members, allowing Mantis to take his hand. Her antennae glowed as she probed his feelings.

“I feel… loss… sadness… Desire to save everyone… Such a terrible past… You… You…” Mantis dragged herself away from him, her eyes wide. “I’m sorry.”

“What is it?” asked Rhodey, concerned.

“Truth. He saw a terrible future. He spoke the truth.”

“Right…” Sam swallowed, his mouth dry.

Natasha held out her hand next and Mantis took it within her own. Closing her eyes, she probed for Natasha’s feelings.

“Cold… Hardness and determination. You suffered. You gave yourself so others might live… You wanted to clear the red in your ledger… And you did.” Mantis twisted her head slightly.

Clint stiffened at those words. “They’re telling the truth.”

“Bug lady proves impossible things can happen,” declared Drax. “Never doubted them!”

Quill scoffed. “Yes, you did!” He rolled his eyes.

Sam sat limply down in his chair. “So, what happens now?”

Tony’s face lit with a grim smile. “We plan and defend the Earth so when Thanos arrives we are ready to defend it.”

Thankfully, they all agreed.

---

Months passed after Tony and Natasha had revealed to the Avengers and the Guardians they had been sent back in time. Life moved on. The Guardians left Earth to continue their adventures in space, though they did give them a bit of hi-tech equipment which enabled the Avengers to call them if needed. Tony continued to try to find ways to reach Asgard to acquire the Space Stone, even going as far as to contact Jane Foster, Thor’s ex-girlfriend, for assistance.

Still, nothing worked.

It seemed the universe was against him.
Eventually, he had to admit Natasha was right and they had to wait for Thanos to make the first move before they had any chance of retrieving the Space Stone.

It only made Tony feel worried about what was coming. Despite Natasha’s assurances that everything would work out as it was supposed to, he couldn’t help but believe things were going to go wrong before they got better.

Yet he couldn’t place his finger on why.

All he could do was make sure he was ready for Thanos’ inevitable arrival on Earth.

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Thursday 21st December 2017

“You feeling alright, Tones?” asked Rhodey, moving closer to Tony as he did his tie in front of the mirror.

Tony nodded. “Sure.”

“You’re shaking,” his long-time friend pointed out.

“I’m not.” He was, especially by the evidence of his hands slightly shaking as he did the knot for his tie.

“Your hands say differently,” teased Rhodey. He rested a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “It’ll be fine. You’ve done this before, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know it works out fine.” Rhodey pointed out wisely.

Tony didn’t want to argue and he let it slide. Despite Rhodey knowing he and Natasha came from the future, they didn’t know they had died first to come here. His marriage hadn’t worked out fine. He and Pepper had just had five years together before he’d died. He’d widowed her. Not by choice mind, by necessity.

Tony sighed. He recognised Rhodey meant the wedding would turn out fine not the length of the marriage but it still lingered that this marriage could be shorter than his previous one with Pepper. They’d debated about getting married now but Pepper had wanted to marry him before Thanos arrived. She wanted to be able to call him her husband. She wanted to experience marriage… even if it was cut short by the inevitability of what Tony and Natasha still had to do.

He couldn’t deny her.

They’d settled on a date just before Christmas, Pepper wanting a winter wedding in the snow. Thankfully the skies had opened up the day before and the ground was covered with snow, making it the perfect day for Pepper.

Tony wanted to give her everything she wanted. He hoped he could.

“Rhodey… Just because Pepper and I married before doesn’t mean it turned out alright. Things are different now. I’m different. Everything I’ve been doing lately has been changing me. We might not have long together…”
Rhodey shook his head. “You two will make it.”

“You said that before.” Tony pointed out, aware that on his original wedding day with Pepper, Rhodey had said the same things.

“Bit unnerving you keep telling me I’ve said this before, you know.”

Tony laughed. “Then stop trying to reassure me.”

“Start believing you two have a long future ahead of you then,” Rhodey threw back.

Tony smiled gently. He could understand why Rhodey was doing what he was. It was a way to calm his nerves.

And he was nervous.

“It’ll be a fantastic day, Tony, you’ll see.” Rhodey shook his shoulder once again. “Come on, let’s get you to the altar. You don’t want to be late for your own wedding, do you?”

“Pepper would kill me if I was,” retorted Tony and Rhodey laughed.

“--- --- ---

“You look beautiful, Pepper,” Natasha watched as Pepper moved out from behind the screen, displaying the dress she wore and the veil. It was quite a simple and plain dress with a decorative pattern across her waist and trailing down to the bottom. It was strapless and Pepper wore her hair down, splayed around her shoulders.

Natasha had done her make-up, simple but elegant, enough that Tony would be speechless.

“What was it like last time?” asked Pepper suddenly.

“Your wedding?” Natasha queried, just to be on the safe side.

“Yes.”

Natasha bit her lip. She hadn’t been invited. Tony and Pepper had eloped in the wake of the Snap, disappearing from public life and only informing the Avengers when they’d set up by the lake. None of them had heard from Tony for months on end though Rhodey had kept them assured they were fine and Tony was recovering from his ordeal in space.

Natasha had been disappointed they had not been invited to the wedding but had understood. It was nice to know she was fully included in this one, which was slightly more public. The press had clamoured for the wedding and Tony and Pepper had agreed for the release of several photographs after the wedding but it would be of their own choosing.

The whole affair would be private, with no access to the ceremony itself. They were marryng outside on the grounds of a hotel located a few miles away from the Avenger’s Facility, with grounds covering forest and a glade. The hotel itself was still within New York State and had a marriage licence.

To keep the hotel’s owners and staff quiet about the momentous event happening within their very walls and grounds, Tony had donated a large sum of money to the hotel and given the staff a nice Christmas bonus, plus negotiated with the owners that the hotel would be closed for over the Christmas season, allowing Tony and Pepper to spend their honeymoon there, enjoying the
quietness of the hotel, so close and yet so far from reality.

“Nat?” Pepper probed, wanting to know why Natasha hadn’t answered her question.

“Truthfully… I wasn’t there. I can’t tell you what it was like. I know it was very quiet and very small. Any more detail you’d have to ask Tony about.” Natasha answered honestly. She was hoping Pepper would as why she wasn’t there before.

Thankfully she didn’t.

Pepper smoothed her dress down. “I think I’m ready.”

Natasha took Pepper’s arm leading her to the top of the stairs where Happy waited for her. He was going to give her away, escorting her through the hotel to the grounds and through the arch to the glade where there was a large tree covered in snow at the centre of the hotel grounds. It was here Tony and Pepper would become husband and wife.

“Wow, Pepper, you look…”


“More so,” complimented Happy, “but don’t tell Tony. I’m sure he’d kill me for saying that.”

“Possibly,” laughed Pepper, linking her arm through Happy’s.

Natasha, carrying the train from the dress, trailed behind as Pepper and Happy walked down the stairs, through reception and the dining hall towards the large glass doors that opened up into the grounds. The snow was soft and crackly beneath their feet. Pepper had chosen not to wear heels, instead, wearing a pair of white, flat shoes which kept her feet warm in the cold air.

They crossed the lawn towards the glade, turning to the right to follow the path to the archway. Stopping at the entrance to the glade, Natasha saw it for the first time, her eyes moving in wonder at the simplistic beauty of the place and how perfect it was for Tony and Pepper to marry.

Tony stood at the end of the altar, Rhodey at his side, hopping from one foot to the other, clearly nervous. Rhodey nudged him in the side and the genius glanced up. His eyes widened and his mouth fell open, going ‘wow’ as he gazed at Pepper as Happy proceeded to walk her down the aisle.

Natasha could feel how excited and nervous Tony felt. Pepper carried a bouquet of flowers in her hands, her smile widening as she saw her future husband.

In the seats watching the ceremony sat the Avengers. They’d invited the Guardians but they hadn’t turned up which they hadn’t been surprised about. They clearly had other things to attend to instead of celebrating a wedding.

Steve was in the front row on the right side, standing with Wanda and Clint. Clint’s family were in the row behind with Sam Wilson.

On the left side sitting in the front row was Peter Parker and his Aunt May, two people who Tony had insisted on inviting. He’d spent a lot of time with Peter over the last few months and had gotten to know his Aunt quite well. He’d asked them to come despite May’s misgivings; they had eventually agreed to attend, much to Tony’s joy.

Natasha remembered the day when he’d confirmed Peter was coming to his wedding. He’d been
positively joyful, jumping around the place like an excited child.

Vision and Fury completed the row. The guests were only small in number but it was all they needed.

The registrar was the owner of the hotel who had been ordained and had performed many weddings already. He was a middle-aged man wearing a blue suit as he stood behind Tony and Rhodey waiting for Pepper to arrive at the altar.

When they arrived, Pepper turned to face Tony who stood, looking nervous. “You okay?”

Natasha watched Tony’s reaction with amusement.

“Yeah, sure. Always. You look beautiful by the way.” Tony reached out for Pepper’s hands, holding them with his own as the turned to face the Registrar.

Natasha moved back to sit next to Steve, holding Pepper’s flowers in her hands watching as the Officiant moved forward towards the couple.

“Good morning. Anthony, Virginia and I would like to welcome everyone on this lovely winter’s day to celebrate their marriage. Their journey began when they first met nearly twenty years ago, culminating in their journey ending here today, and a new road opening up before them.” The Officiant swept his gaze over the guests before settling upon Tony and Pepper. “If there is anyone who can say that this couple should not be in matrimony, please speak now or forever hold your peace.”

No one raised an issue, exactly what Natasha expected to happen.

“We will proceed straight to the vows.”

He turned his full attention to Tony and Pepper.

“Anthony and Virginia, please repeat after me.”

Tony went first. “I, Anthony Edward Stark, take you, Virginia Potts, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

The Officiant looked to Pepper. “And, if you can repeat after me…”

“I, Virginia Potts, take you, Anthony Edward Stark, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

Both of them smiled at one another and Natasha could see Tony was eager to seal their marriage with a kiss. It felt nice to be watching the wedding, involved. She should have been before but the Accords had torn them apart. The Officiant was moving onto the next part of the ceremony.

Rhodey stepped forward with the rings positioned on a velvety cushion.

“Anthony and Virginia have chosen these rings to represent their unbreakable bond and their undying love for one another. Anthony, please take the ring and repeat after me.”

Tony picked up the plain gold wedding band and spoke the words the Officiator asked him to. “I give you this ring as a sign of our love, trust, and marriage. I promise to care for you above all
others, to give you my love, friendship, and support, and to respect and cherish you throughout our life together.” He slid the ring onto Pepper’s left ring finger.

Pepper turned to Rhodey and took the ring meant for Tony. She repeated after the Officiant. “I give you this ring as a sign of our love, trust, and marriage. I promise to care for you above all others, to give you my love, friendship, and support, and to respect and cherish you throughout our life together.” Pepper placed the ring on Tony’s ring finger and pushed it on.

The Officiant smiled broadly, raising his arms. “It is with my great pleasure that I announce you, husband and wife.” He inclined his chin. “You may kiss the bride.”

Natasha watched as Tony leaned in to press his lips against Pepper’s, holding her still against his body.

He kissed her again as Natasha joined in the clapping and cheers coming from the guests.

Though the wedding had been small and intimate it was still a special day.

At least they’d been able to marry without any unexpected surprises.

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**Wedding Suite**

After the Wedding Breakfast and the party that had followed their marriage, Tony and Pepper retreated to the special suite that had been prepared for them by the hotel staff to spend their first night as a married couple. They had barely made it through the door before Tony was pressing Pepper against the wall, his hips gently thrusting against hers, as he kissed her deeply on the lips.

“Tony…” she murmured, groaning at the feel of him, of not just of where his hips were moving but of where his hands moved over her bare shoulders, of his lips moving against hers.

“Pep…” he breathed between kisses, his eyes full of lust and desire for the woman who was now his wife. He smiled, pressing a soft kiss to the tip of her nose. “Mrs. Stark…”

Pepper wrapped her arms around his neck, staring deeply into his eyes. “Never thought I’d ever hear those words…”

“God, it feels so good to say them,” he whispered, as he trailed kisses down his neck. “As your husband, it is my job to worship you in every possible way… Tonight I will do exactly what you ask…” He pressed his hips against her again.

Pepper moaned at the feel of him. She moved one hand from his neck and brought it down between them, sliding it into his trousers to grip his firm hardness. Tony moaned into her mouth as her fingers brushed over his groin, pressing her fingers against the soft skin. “I want this…” she whispered into his ear, “inside me… I want you, Tony…”

She removed her hand and Tony took it, leading her to the bed which was draped in soft gold colour, with little flowers decorating the fabric.

“Your wish is my command, Mrs. Stark,” he said, as he unzipped Pepper’s dress, helping her step out of it before gently laying it on the table opposite, being careful not to rip it. By the time he turned back around Pepper had already removed her bra and knickers and was laying back on the bed, her hair splayed around her shoulders, legs spread wide open giving Tony one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen.
His own erection hardened just at the sight of her.

“You’re a bit overdressed for this, Mr. Stark,” she teased, moving a hand down between her legs, stroking herself.

Tony didn’t take too long before he had divested himself of his own clothing, not bothering to place them carefully like he had with Pepper’s dress. He just wanted her. God, she was beautiful to him. So beautiful and they were married. She was his wife.

Pepper was still moving her fingers between her legs, slipping one finger inside herself before Tony was joining her on the bed, his own hardness eager to join them together.

Pepper removed her hand from herself and took Tony’s right hand, placing it against her centre. “Feel me.”

He did so, stroking her whilst pressing soft kisses to her face, neck, and breasts, slipping a finger inside of her, and then another. “You are so ready for this…” He removed his fingers, sucking her juices clean from them.

Positioning himself between her legs, he brushed his erection over her entrance, causing shudders to run through her body at the intimate feel.

He smiled as she gritted her teeth. “Just… stop… teasing… Get it…. inside!”

Pressing a kiss on her lips, he placed one hand on her cheek, he watched her expression as he slowly, torturously slid inside her, feeling her whole until he could go no further and their groins were pressed together.

“Oh my god…” Pepper breathed, moving a hand down between them to feel where they joined. “Why does this feel so good?”

“Because I love you,” he whispered. “You’re the first woman I have ever made love to. And be the only woman I ever will…”

Out of all the woman he had ever slept with in his life, Pepper was the only one he had ever truly loved and worshipped. Sex with her was different. Sex was amazing with her and it seemed it was just going to get better and better.

He felt a warming in his chest as he slowing began to move, pulling himself out before thrusting back in slowly and sensually, ripples running through his body. He passionately kissed her, lifting her legs up to get a better angle.

He didn’t know how long he was slowly thrusting into her before she muttered ‘faster’ into the air and Tony increased his pace.

Noises came from Pepper’s mouth as he hit different spots each time.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” he returned, lifting her legs higher, increasing his pace even more.

“Harder…”

“Fuck, Pepper…” He knew he was close, but this was about Pepper.

He thrust harder, each time her body moving up and down as he pulled out and slid back in. She
was close, he could see it in her eyes.

She didn’t disappoint him as she clenched her hips, squeezing him as her orgasm washed over her. She yelled his name, her arms going limp and her legs loosening from around his back.

Tony chased his own release, Pepper’s own orgasm rocking back against him, and he came inside her, stilling his hips as he made her his.

He leaned down to kiss her tenderly on the lips.

“Don’t leave me…” she whispered. “I want you inside me still…”

He was softening but he didn’t want to pull out and evidently neither did she want him too either.

Gently, without removing himself from Pepper, he laid down on his side, hugging her close so he was still inside her.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” she smiled up at him. 

“No, thank you, Mrs. Stark.” Tony ran a hand over her face and through her hair, bringing a hand down to rest one on her backside. “I love you. So much.” He swallowed. “I’m glad we got to have this.” He didn’t want to say it but he did. “Even if it is just for a short while.”

She smiled sadly at him, aware of what he was thinking. “I know. Me too.”

They fell asleep in each other’s arms, not knowing in just five short months their lives would change forever.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

I decided that Tony and Natasha would need to offer some element of proof for their assertions they were from the future. That is why they used Mantis to read the other’s feelings before having theirs done so they’d know they were not lying.

I hope everyone enjoyed the wedding. I think a few of you were expecting the wedding to go completely wrong... Or their happy day would be shattered by Thanos arriving... I'm not that mean...

Next chapter: Bruce Returns - to be posted next Sunday 26th January!

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty-Four: Bruce Returns

Chapter Summary

Bruce returns...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Updating slightly later as I was out today.

Short chapter today... Next one will be longer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bruce Returns

Wednesday 30th May 2018

Avengers Facility

Tony leaned over his work-bench, goggles on as he fiddled with the little nanonites he was carefully inserting into his Arc Reactor. It was delicate work. He was still running the program that installed the software into their tiny little CPU brains.

Now that they were close to Thanos’ arrival, Tony had decided he needed to advance his suit further. He needed the suit he’d used just before his death, so he’d set about designing it and having it built. It was taking longer than he would have liked. He’d originally built it over five years, making tons of different versions of it before signing off on the final design. He was also trying to implement the ability to withstand large amounts of power, mainly to counteract any powers Tony may demonstrate. If he did have powers and they unleashed, he wanted them to be compatible with his suit. Of course, the amount of work he was putting into his suit, didn’t mean it would work. He had no way of knowing what type of powers he had until he demonstrated them. Only then he’d be able to accurately configure the suit to work with them.

Currently, the Arc Reactor was in bits as he fitted each nanonite into its separate, small housing within the casing itself. It was delicate work and one wrong placement could cause problems.

It was during this time he was surprised by Doctor Strange opening a portal directly into Tony’s lab, walking through it with his cloak swishing behind him and Bruce stumbling out after him. So startled was he by the sudden appearance, Tony nearly dropped the pincers holding the nanonite centimetres from the Reactor, but he managed to salvage it.

“Bruce?” Tony asked, putting his equipment down. He shouldn’t have been surprised by the
sudden appearance of Bruce. Today was the date Tony had left Earth originally. What had thrown him off course was Strange bringing him straight into Tony’s private work lab at the Facility.

“Tony.” Bruce rounded the table. “You need to get everyone together. Thor is gone… And Thanos is coming.”

Dread filled the pit of Tony’s stomach. The inevitable had happened. The Space Stone had been acquired by Thanos, the only Infinity Stone he and Natasha hadn’t been able to retrieve last year. They’d known this was coming.

“Damn it,” he whispered quietly, running his left hand over his face. “Bruce –”

But his friend cut him off. “Wait, when did you get married?” Bruce had spied the ring on Tony’s ring finger.

“Five months ago. I would have liked you there,” said Tony.

“I really have missed a lot,” Bruce sunk into a chair opposite Tony’s work desk.

Doctor Strange stepped back towards the portal he had opened. “I’ll be back at the Sanctum if you need me.”

Tony nodded. He knew Strange had looked into the future before he had gifted the Time Stone to them last year. He probably knew he wasn’t needed right now. “I’m sure you’ll come when we need you.”

Strange inclined his head and stepped back through the portal, closing it behind him.

“Do you want a drink?” Tony asked Bruce.

“Just water,” answered Bruce.

Tony poured Bruce some water and passed the glass to him. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Bruce eagerly drank it, downing it in one fluid motion. He placed the cup on the desk. “Tony, we don’t have long. Thanos is coming.”

“We’ve been preparing for him for a while,” admitted Tony.

Bruce looked up sharply. “How can you know about him?”

“It’s been a long three years…” noted Tony. “We’ve known about him for about two years now and have been working on solutions to counteract him.”

Bruce was stunned. “How…?”

“We received intelligence regarding his activities. We’ve been aware of the Stones and have been collecting them. There were already two of them on Earth – I’d hazard a guess Thanos is coming to retrieve those ones, but we’ve hidden them.”

“There are still another three out in space, Tony, he could get them!” Bruce warned. “He’ll do that first before he comes here!”

“We’ll handle it,” smiled Tony. “We’ll call a meeting with the other Avengers for today. There is a lot you do not know and a lot we need to talk about. Why don’t you freshen up, whilst I make some calls?”
Natasha wasn’t surprised when her phone rang. She’d been expecting a call from Tony, today of all times.

She didn’t even bother to say hello when she answered. “He’s arrived?”

“Yeah. Bruce is here…”

“Then that means Thor is somewhere floating in space and will be picked up by the Guardians,” swallowed Nat. “They’ll bring him here, right?”

“They will. Before they left Earth, I made sure to ask them if they ever ran into Thor to bring him straight to Earth. I hope they will,” admitted Tony. “Everything is falling into place. The only problem we have is Thanos has the Space Stone, the last one we need. How can we get it from him?”

Natasha couldn’t say what she knew. Tony would have to get it on his own when Thanos kidnapped him. She knew it was going to happen at some point but when? The Stones were being quiet, not confirming anything to her. The guilt she felt knowing it was inevitable Tony would be in Thanos’ hands and not being able to warn him. She hated it. “I don’t know how we can get it, Tony,” she replied quietly. “I’m sure a solution will present itself.”

Tony fell silent for a few seconds and when he spoke again he didn’t directly respond to her last words. “We need to get Steve, Wanda, Rhodey, and Pepper here for a meeting with Bruce.”

“What about the others?” she inquired, surprised at Tony’s instructions to only include a select few. “Clint?”

“Clint is with his family. You know he is semi-retired, only comes when he is called,” pointed out Tony. “It’ll take him a good few hours to get here whereas we can be sitting down to a meeting with everyone in the next half-an-hour.”

He made excellent points.

“Still, we should call him in. He doesn’t have to be here for the meeting but if we are going to be attacked imminently it is better we have everyone assembled,” she explained logically.

“Points well made,” conceded Tony. “Okay, Conference room in forty minutes.”

She signed off on the call.

Everything was coming together.

“Hey, Bruce.” She walked into the conference room twenty-five minutes early. Tony and Bruce were already there. Tony was on his phone, whilst Bruce tucked into a sandwich.

“Nat!” Bruce kicked back his chair and stood up, watching her approach.

Choosing to step around the table towards him, Natasha approached him, a slight smile on her face. “It’s good to see you again.”

Bruce scratched the back of his neck. “Kinda wish it wasn’t when the world was ending though.”
She chuckled slightly, reached out and pulled him into a hug. “I’ve missed you.”

Bruce held her slightly tighter, pressing his face into her shoulder. “Me too.”

“I’d ask how you are but I gather it isn’t good?” she asked.

Bruce shook his head. “I’d rather wait until everyone is here,” he said. “Don’t want to repeat myself.”

“Understandable,” she mentioned, aware of how many times she and Tony had repeated the same conversation with the other Avengers about their unique circumstances. Unfortunately, they would have to do it again now with Bruce. And Thor, once he arrived. Pulling a chair out, Natasha sat opposite Bruce. “There is something Tony and I need to tell you before the others get here.”

“You do?”

She nodded. She caught Tony’s eyes. He seemed to agree with her decision to inform Bruce now. “It hasn’t been simple for us. Not for a while at least.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce swallowed, his voice slightly cracking.

“Tony and I… We came back,” she stated as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

“Came back?” Bruce’s face was a mixture of confusion. “From where?”

Natasha traded glances with Tony. “From the future.”


Tony chuckled gently. “It’s very true. It happened. That’s how we’ve known about Thanos for a while. In our time he won. We’ve been trying to change it.”

Bruce swallowed, his eyes flicking back and forth between them. “But… where did our Tony and Nat go? Did you replace them? Did they just vanish?”

“We merged with our past selves,” explained Natasha. “We both went to sleep one day and then woke up here, back in the past, before Thanos, giving us the perfect opportunity to prevent it from happening. Something sent us back and wants us to stop it. And we’re close. So close as well.”

“I’m not sure I believe this…” muttered Bruce.

“Everyone else knows,” added Tony quietly. “They’ve been working with us for a while now. We wouldn’t lie about this. We’ve worked together before, Bruce. I know last time we did, Ultron happened… but over the years I’ve learned from my mistakes and from the future I’m from you taught me a lot.”

“I did?” Bruce seemed surprised.

Tony smiled warmly. “You did.”

“Thanks…” A light tinge of pink appeared over Bruce’s cheekbones. “I think.”

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Once everyone had gathered for the meeting, they sat around a table in the conference room. Tony sat next to Pepper. To his right were Natasha and Rhody, and to his left were Wanda, Bruce and
Steve. Clint was on his way and the rest of the Avengers would be filled in later that day once Tony and his core group had filled Bruce in with everything going on.

There was no reason for them all to be there for this initial meeting.

Steve looked at Bruce. He’d hugged him warmly as soon as he’d seen Bruce when he’d walked into the Conference room. “What happened to you? Ultron was three years ago… You’ve been missing since then.”

“I was the Hulk for two years,” admitted Bruce, “in a contest of champions on a planet called Sakaar, until Thor showed up. I don’t really remember those two years… Thor… rescued me? Talked sense into the Hulk… I think.” He passed his gaze to Nat. “Waking up after so long… It was… I missed out on two years! All that time I was the Hulk. I don’t know how I got there, only we had the QuinJet… then Hulk destroyed it. There were portals in the sky… wormholes. I can only assume the QuinJet flew into one and it transported me to Sakaar where I was found. They loved the Hulk there…” Bruce shook his head. “I can’t explain it.”

“Where’s Thor?” asked Steve.

“Gone.” Bruce bowed his head. “Thanos defeated him. Asgard is destroyed. Half of Thor’s people are dead too… He allowed half to live… He wasn’t there for Thor or for the Asgardians…”

“What was he there for?” enquired Rhodey, even though they all knew what he was after.

“Infinity Stones. There was one on that ship. Loki had it and he never told anyone about it. He’s changed… He’s not the Loki we fought in New York. To save Thor’s life he gave it up. He tried not to at first… He attempted something stupid afterward. Tried to kill Thanos when his back was turned… He knew.”

Tony swallowed. They hadn’t been able to prevent the same events unfolding. The one thing they hadn’t been able to change was the fate of Thor’s people. He’d still lost half of them. Loki had still died, even though Tony wasn’t unhappy about that, he knew Loki’s death and the loss of half his people, and failing to kill Thanos had been the biggest reasons in Thor’s reaction to after the Snap.

“He killed Loki,” continued Bruce. “But something I need to know. Tony said you learned of Thanos two years ago. How? What have you been doing?” He splayed his hands out on the table, surprised by how much he had missed.

“It’s complicated,” answered Natasha.

“The last few years have been… different,” stated Pepper quietly.

Bruce looked at Tony, a questioning expression on his face.

“As I said a lot has happened in the time you’ve been away, Bruce.” Rubbing a weary hand down his face, Tony sighed. “How did you escape the ship?” He already knew the answer but needed to hear it from Bruce.

“Heimdall,” muttered Bruce. “He sent me back here to warn you all.” He leaned forward, his face in his hands. “The Hulk lost against Thanos. I tried but he overpowered me.”

“What else happened there?” asked Natasha. “He said something, didn’t he?”

Bruce nodded. “Thanos did. Once he had defeated us he told us about his grand plan for the universe and his need to acquire all six Infinity Stones. He said there are people working against
him already. He said someone stole one of the Stones from his army before they could retrieve it. He’s angry. Thanos is looking for the person who took it. We need to find them before Thanos does. He can’t mean the two you’ve found here, he’s not visited Earth yet, so he wouldn’t know.”

Tony exchanged a glance with Natasha. They both knew the truth. Regardless of what Bruce assumed, it was obvious Thanos was coming to them. The question was, was how long would it be before he launched an attack upon Earth?

“Did Thanos say anything about where he was specifically going next?” asked Rhodey.

Bruce shook his head. “No. Only that he knows where they are. How can we get to them if we don’t even know ourselves? They could help us stop Thanos for good!”

An uncomfortable silence went round the room. Pepper squeezed Tony’s hand and Steve’s expression went solemn.

“I feel like I may have missed something big…” Bruce observed, his eyes questioning as he looked at each of his teammates in concern. “What else did I miss?”

“A lot,” admitted Natasha.

Tony sighed. “We do not need to find the person with the Stones, Bruce.” Now was the time to tell Bruce the truth.

“But –” Bruce began.

Tony rose from his chair and began to walk around the table, his shoulders dropping. Hopefully this would be the last time he would have to repeat himself over the Stones and how he and Nat had come back from the future. At least he knew for sure now that Thanos was coming for him. The incident with the Power Stone on Xandar last year had clearly put a target on his back, even if Squidward had not witnessed what Tony had fully done with the Stone, it had been enough for Thanos to want him, to seek him out.

Well, I’m not going to make it easy for him to get me. That was a vow he intended to keep.

He passed Natasha and Rhodey and placed his hands on the table, leaning forward.

Taking a deep breath, he prepared to speak.

Tony never got the chance.

Wind buffeted behind him, chilling him to the bone. Looking behind him, he saw a blue, crackling portal open up behind him.

Oh shit.

“Tony!” Natasha pushed her seat aside, hand out towards him, one hand going to the gun in her holster.

And then Thanos was there. His head and shoulders, and both arms, with one leg still in the portal and the other placed on the floor was coming out of the portal, the Space Stone glowing in the Gauntlet as he maintained the portal.

Tony tried to step back but Thanos reached out and grabbed him by the neck, cutting off his air. Reaching for Thanos’ thick hand, scrabbling at the tight grip, Tony fought to free himself.
He heard yells, the sound of gunshots but all he could decipher was Thanos’ cruel words to him.

“You’re mine, Stark.”

And, he was pulled through the portal as it closed around them.

To be continued...

Many thanks to JediPanda22 for another fabulous illustration!

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Evil cliffhanger... Sorry! I always intended on ending this chapter here.

And yes, Tony did not have his Arc Reactor on him when Thanos took him. So, erm,
he has no suit! :D

Loki is dead, sorry. Ragnarok happened as it did. There was nothing Tony or Nat could do to stop it from happening.

The next chapter entitled Thanos will focus on Thanos and Tony... I'm really excited for this chapter. It will be a big one and will make up for the short length of this chapter.

To be posted next Sunday 2nd February 2020!

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty-Five: Thanos

Chapter Summary

Thanos has Tony prisoner...

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! This chapter was really fun to write... And I know it has probably been a long week for you all in waiting for this update! I’ve been excited to get to this part of the story for months now! :D

And, just a quick note, I’ve been dealing with a Anti-Tony Stark fan who has been bashing this story in reviews which are all posted on here under Chapter 2 of this story (Chapter One: The Purpose). EDIT: it has now all been deleted based on advice given to me by my reviewers here. I just thought... lets follow the advice of my reviewers and I have chosen to do so!

Still, please do, enjoy today's chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Thanos

Wednesday 30th May 2018

Sanctuary II

Thanos did not let go of Tony when they emerged from the portal onto his ship. He did loosen his grip, allowing Tony the chance to breathe. Still, he hung there, scrabbling at the arms as he was lifted up to look Thanos in the eye.

“Stark.”

“Hi!” Tony managed.

Thanos squeezed his throat. “This is not a social visit.”

“Right…” Tony wheezed. His throat was going to bruise in the morning. If I survive to the morning...

“You have information I want. And you are going to tell me.”

“Really? I don’t think –” Tony yelped as he was abruptly dropped to the floor, landing with a loud thud. Tony groaned, taking in mouthfuls of fresh air, massaging his bruised throat. He stayed his hand down his front, feeling for the Arc Reactor, only his fingers found nothing. Shit.
He’d been working on the Arc Reactor when Bruce had arrived with Doctor Strange. It had been in pieces… He’d been in the middle of reinserting the nanonites and he hadn’t picked it up in his hurry to organise the others to get to the Conference room. He had no way to defend himself, no possible way to escape. He would have to improvise. He was good at improvising.

Tony got to his knees and looked up at Thanos who stood a few metres away from him. “What information?” He could feign ignorance, yet he was sure his attempts to do so would anger Thanos.

Thanos smirked. “I think you know what I mean, Stark. Stalling will get you nowhere.”

Tony shrugged. “Worth a shot.” Casting his eyes about, he took in his surroundings. He seemed to be in some sort of throne room. In the centre sat a throne. The room itself was dull and dreary and there was a slight draught on his skin. Above him was the roof with an opening, showing into the vastness of space. There had to be a force field in use, maintaining the gravity and breathable air. He could see the Space Stone sitting in the Gauntlet on Thanos’ left hand. If he could somehow reach it…

He could try, however. Even if the attempt angered Thanos.

He bounded forward, never reaching Thanos as a portal opened up beneath his feet and he fell through, falling through another one, and then another and another, his vision getting dizzy as Thanos continued to throw him through portals he was making. It stopped when his back slammed into the wall and Thanos finally allowed him to slide down to the ground.

Blinking away the dizziness, Tony staggered to his feet, leaning on the wall for support.

Thanos smirked. “Don’t try that again.”

“Or what?” Tony dared, already knowing what his enemy would do.

He wasn’t disappointed as his feet fell out from under him and he was being thrown with force through various portals before he slammed onto the deck of the ship and Thanos’ boot landed on his chest, pressing down hard, restricting his breathing.

“You’ve always been an annoyance, Stark. I’ve watched you for a long time. You’ve interfered far too many times. Now you’ve gone too far.”

“Have I?” he wheezed.

The boot pressed harder on his chest. Thanos leaned over him. “You have something I want.”

“I doubt it,” Tony retorted, determined to not make this easy for Thanos. He gripped the boot, knowing full well he would not be able to shift it. He glared at his captor.

Thanos pressed harder.

Tony couldn’t breathe.

“You could make this easy, Stark. Tell me what I want to know and you may yet live. Where are the Infinity Stones?”

There was no point in attempting to deny he had the knowledge. Thanos clearly knew.

He formed his lips to form one syllable. “No,” he hissed through the lack of air.
Thanos snarled, removed his boot from his chest and turned away from him, clutching his fist.

Tony knew what was coming before it even did. A portal formed beneath him and he fell through it before he even had the chance to move. But Thanos had transported him somewhere else as he fell into what looked like a large pit. Steadying himself on his feet, Tony glanced around at his new surroundings.

Thanos loomed down at him from above through the portal. “I have placed you within a Chitauri training ground. You have no means to defend yourself. The suit you have always relied upon is back on Earth. My warriors are expertly trained. They could tear you apart within seconds.”

Tony swallowed. He didn’t like the sound of this. If Thanos was going to throw his whole army at him then he was screwed. “You won’t allow them to kill me though,” he pointed out. “Killing me does not serve your goal in kidnapping me. If you wanted me dead, you’d have crushed my throat when you had me but you didn’t.” He was feeling a bit more confident now that he was talking back at his captor. “You need me to tell you where the Infinity Stones are. The simple answer is I do not know.”

“I know you are lying, Stark. Ebony Maw told me what he saw on Xandar. I know you took the Stone, as you did with the one in the possession of The Collector. I’ve been biding my time, studying you. Spies have infiltrated Earth. I have known your every movement for months now. Do you believe you’ve been clever to hide things from me? You’ve failed.” Thanos smirked.

Dread filled the pit of Tony’s stomach. How had they not known? Thanos had been watching them for months now, specifically him…

“It was an offhanded comment, but it still sent shivers down Tony’s spine. His throat felt dry. “No…” Horror washed through him at the implication the Titan had made at having spied on Tony’s wedding without his knowledge. The worst part was he would know about Pepper and how much she meant to him. He’d use her against him.

Thanos never responded, only closing the portal, trapping Tony in the darkened and musky pit, waiting for the inevitable band of Chitauri that would come for him.

He was not alone for long before he could hear the sound of footsteps echoing around the pit. Casting his gaze about he saw several small tunnels built into the wall and from them marched Chitauri, daggers at the ready, their claws extended and their teeth bared as they marched closer towards Tony.

“Right… This is going to be problematic.” He needed the Arc Reactor. Damn it! Why did I have to leave it in my lab?

Still, even if he did have his Arc Reactor, he doubted Thanos would have allowed him to keep it. He’d have had it ripped from him and then broken it into several shattering pieces, though he may have had a chance to activate it, even with Thanos strangling him. How much further he would have gone he didn’t want to consider. He had bigger concerns right now: mainly the Chitauri surrounding him.

They attacked at once.

Tony ducked, rolled and kicked out as the Chitauri grabbed for him, slashing at the air he had just
vacated with their claws, baring their teeth, snapping their jaws closed as they lunged for him. Tony didn’t get far as several of them stopped his rolling with their feet.

Arms were grabbed and stretched and his legs as well despite his best efforts to kick them away from him. There were too many of them.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to raise his back, attempting to pull himself away from the grip the Chitauri had on him. They were pressing him down to the floor, daggers shining brightly in the darkness of the gloomy pit. Tony wrenched to the right, yet he was pushed down further.

Furious and desperate to try to escape, Tony twisted again, nearly dislocating his shoulder, briefly freeing his arm from the grip of his captors. Even as he tried to scrabble away, Tony felt stinging slashes fall across his body. Hisses were pulled from his lips as each Chitauri slashed their daggers over his skin, tearing his clothes.

Once again his arms were stretched out and his legs the same with one Chitauri to each limb, securing him in place.

“Hey, careful with the merchandise! I’m quite valuable you know!” he bellowed, still trying to struggle despite the hopelessness of the situation. There was nothing he could do to escape.

The daggers kept on descending. They left no place untouched, slitting his skin across his face, up and down his arms and legs, before finally lifting up his shirt.

One Chitauri stood over him, its head twisted to the side in curiosity, holding up his own dagger that was already dripping with droplets of Tony’s blood.

It trailed its fingers down his stomach before placing the blade on the skin.

The skin stretched across its mouth as it ‘smiled’, pushing the dagger into Tony, slitting the skin and dragging it down, leaving a trail of blood upon his belly. Tony hissed in pain.

They released his hands and legs, and Tony took the opportunity to try to escape but it was fruitless.

No longer were they using the daggers to harm him, instead it was brute force, brute strength, hitting, punching and kicking. It was a vicious cycle, one he could not break. All he could do to defend himself was an attempt to protect his body as much as possible, tucking his head into his chest and wait for the abuse to end.

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Thanos eventually retrieved him from the pit. He didn’t know how long he had been down there for, only that his body ached and was covered in bruises. His clothes were torn and dried blood stained them.

He was dumped on the floor of Thanos’ throne room once again, curling himself up into a protective ball to prevent further injury. He knew he wasn’t safe from harm here and it was natural instinct to protect his body.

“The Chitauri can no longer hurt you,” said Thanos gently.

“No, but you can,” returned Tony.

“This can end if you tell me what I wish to know,” explained the Titan quietly. “Where are the
Stones?”

Tony’s dried lips pressed together again. “No.”

“A pity you wish to take the hard road, Stark. I’d rather not harm your brain. You have given me no other choice.” Thanos’ voice was hard and unwelcoming.

Tony rolled onto his back. There was no point in fighting, not when he would need all his mental strength to prevent Thanos from digging around in his brain. Besides he hurt too much to fight back, even when Squidward levitated him into the air and floated him out of the throne room. He had to conserve his strength and hope he was strong enough to stop them from rummaging through his brain.

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There were no other words to describe this chamber other than ‘torture chamber’. It was filled with various pieces of pain-inducing equipment and Tony tried to ignore looking at them and concentrate on preparing himself for what was to come.

Thanos watched as his captive was placed upon a slab, forced to lay straight, with his arms and legs chained to cuffs upon it. Another chain was pulled over Tony’s throat, stopping him from moving his head.

“If you try to move you will damage your brain,” the alien attending to Tony breathed. Squidward was even uglier close-up.

He winced, closing his eyes. Breathe, Tony, breathe. The fact that he was allowing this to happen to him without fighting back was a miracle in itself. He’d learned over the years which battles had to be fought and which ones had to be abandoned. This was one such case of needing to be abandoned.

Above him, Tony could see a helmet that was slowly being lowered. Small pinpricks of needles sat within it.

“This will hurt.”

“Wait, Ebony Maw,” said Thanos, striding forward to peer down at Tony. “One last chance, Stark, where are the Infinity Stones?”

Tony smirked as best as he could. “That’s Squidward’s name? I think I prefer Squidward.”

Thanos snarled. “Hook him up.”

Despite being chained to the slab, Tony did try to twist his head as the helmet was lowered. He wasn’t able to move even an inch. He could feel the pinpricks of the needles against his skull. This was going to hurt…

Slipping his fingers beneath the back of Tony’s head, Ebony Maw pressed two sticky pads to the back of his head. Despite the chain holding his head in place, he was still able to slip his fingers underneath. Next came two wires which were stuck to the back of Tony’s neck on the pads.

“He’s ready.” Ebony Maw bowed at Thanos. “Would you like me to begin?”

Thanos nodded.
Tony closed his eyes, slowing his breathing. He knew what was coming, what they intended to do.

He jerked suddenly, a scream ripped from his throat as the needles were pushed in suddenly, penetrating his skull and into his brain. “Argh! Ow.” He panted, trying to regain his breathing as pain rocked through his brain.

“You bought this on yourself, Stark,” intoned Thanos as he stood in front of Tony, arms hanging loose at his sides. “You could have co-operated.”

Tony gritted his teeth. “Never.”

“Proceed. Let us find out what he is hiding from us.”

Images started passing through Tony’s brain and he slightly opened his eyes to see his own memories being projected out in front of him from a screen Squidward was controlling. Whatever the needles were doing they were about to accurately visualise Tony’s memories for Thanos to transverse through. He could see himself as a child with his mother. His father was nowhere to be seen which was always typical of Howard Stark.


Tony winced as the needles seemed to twist in his skull, forcing through years of memories before stopping and showing himself and Pepper meet for the first time after she’d pepper-sprayed Happy for denying her access to his office without an appointment. She’d expected to be fired but she’d raised a crucial error Tony had made in his mathematics, something no one else had picked up on because they hadn’t wanted to disagree with the genius. Pepper had been promoted to his personal assistant after that.

The image froze on her face.

“Your wife, the woman you love…” mused Thanos. “I could have her killed. I know what she looks like; I know where she lives and works. It would be so easy.”

“Don’t!” The word was pulled from Tony’s mouth before he could stop it.

Thanos smirked. “She’s a very beautiful specimen, one worthy of you. Consider yourself lucky at the moment I will allow her to live.”

That wasn’t reassuring in the slightest. It meant Thanos had her in his sights and if given the chance he would kill her, and Tony couldn’t have that threat dangled over his head. As soon as he was able, he’d make sure Pepper was safe, even if it meant he’d have to lock her up until Thanos was dealt with.

“Look deeper,” instructed Thanos.

Tony felt the needles moving again and grimaced as he tried to maintain some control of what Thanos could see. Yet he didn’t seem to be able to. As soon as he attempted to defend certain memories, the needles in his brain kept attacking the memories; meaning to avoid interest in them, he’d have to stop thinking about them.

It didn’t work.

Tony’s defences were not working.

“You cannot defend your memories from us,” Squidward explained. “The needles are designed to
disrupt any natural defences you may have. Human biology has not evolved enough for you to be able to withstand a mind probe.”

*Shit.* His defences were useless. He’d got himself into this situation, believing he’d be able to at least defend himself. He was going to give Thanos *everything.*

“No!” he shouted out in desperation as images of his memories were projected out in front of him. He could see himself as Iron Man in New York, during the time Thanos’ forces had originally struck. Tony squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to prove them wrong about being unable to defend himself, yet no matter how hard he tried, he simply could not stop them.

He’d find out everything. He would know…

They watched every major event which had happened to him as a member of the Avengers before they began the scroll through the Accords situation.

The only problem was, was the memories they were seeing were of the first time he had lived through it, not seeing the changes he had made when he’d come back with Natasha. Would Thanos notice the difference? If he’d been spying on Tony for a while he’d probably made an effort to research him.

Knowing there was nothing he could do against the mind probe, Tony kept his eyes closed, trying to ignore the flashes of memory being brought forth. He tried to think of something else, anything to distract himself but the mind probe was efficient. It kept him concentrated on the memories, unable to distract himself from the horror he was being forced to endure.

“What is this?” Thanos leaned forward. “This memory…”

They were now at Tony’s memory of the airport fight. Tony pursed his lips. Thanos would come asking questions, he was sure of it.

“This didn’t happen…” Thanos concluded. “My spies told me how the Accords were settled and there were no such fractions within the Avengers…” He turned his dark eyes upon Tony. “Perhaps he has found a way to suppress the memory device.”

Tony wished that was true. If he could convince Thanos that these were fake memories, perhaps he could still find a way to salvage this situation before Thanos went too far into Tony’s memories for his search of the Infinity Stones? It was possible…

Squidward shattered Tony’s hopes before he could offer up a response.

“No, they are real memories. They are provoking emotions from him.”

“How is this possible?” Thanos leaned over Tony. “What are you hiding from us, Stark? Increase the power. I want to know everything.”

Switches were flipped and knobs turned as a powerful electric current zapped into Tony’s brain, eliciting a scream tearing from his throat. His memories continued to flow through his brain, projecting out by the machine attached to his head.

Thanos saw *everything.*

The fight in Siberia Tony had fought against Steve and Bucky over the murder of his parents, his mentorship with Peter in the following months were also memories he perused through, and then the memories stopped as Squidward paused the machine as he came across his own image in
Tony’s head and their first encounter in New York when they had come to retrieve the Time Stone from Doctor Strange.

“I have never visited your planet!” the alien snarled in Tony’s face. “How could you have memories of me?”

Tony refused to answer, closing his eyes and defiantly ignoring the anger in Squidward’s voice.

“Keep looking,” instructed Thanos. “Whatever he is hiding, we will find it. He cannot defend himself against this.”

The memories continued to scroll through Tony’s head. He couldn’t stop it, couldn’t prevent them from seeing the future he had already lived. How far would they go?

“So you’ve met me before, Tony Stark?” Thanos’ voice interrupted Tony’s inner monologue.

Tony still kept his eyes closed. He knew what they were seeing: Titan, the planet which had haunted his nightmares for years afterward, and his encounter with Thanos there. He refused to speak or articulate any words, just swallowing the lump in his throat as he fought to maintain his posture.

“You’re from the future, aren’t you?” Thanos stated conversationally.

He tried to ignore it.

“How did you do it? You understand we will find out regardless of whether you speak or not.”

“I know,” whispered Tony. There was no point in maintaining his silence when he recognised the inevitable was going to happen. They’d keep on digging into his brain. He just didn’t want Thanos to learn about Morgan, but the deeper they pried the more they’d see.

“For you to have come back, I must have succeeded in my goal to obtain all the Infinity Stones,” deduced Thanos. “You’ve been changing things to prevent it from happening.”

Tony didn’t answer.

“I saw myself in your memory there with not just one Infinity Stone but four,” deduced Thanos. “This only further proves you are indeed from the future.”

“Does it?” drawled Tony. “Maybe I dreamt it.”

“The mind probe picks up memories only. Fake illusions or images from the imagination cannot fool it.” Thanos turned his sharp gaze upon Tony who had finally opened his eyes, still lying there chained to the slab. “And that is how you already know where the Stones were. You already knew. You’ve rewritten time.”

“Think you may be jumping to conclusions there!” Tony attempted to deny Thanos’ leap in logic. He recognised he wouldn’t be able to dissuade Thanos from believing it. He’d already worked it out for himself. Once the Titan was sure of something it was difficult to convince him otherwise.

“I do not believe I am, Stark,” replied Thanos. He reached out a hand to stroke a finger down Tony’s cheek.

If Tony could have shivered at the touch he would have but he was too tightly restrained to react to the unwelcome one.
“Even if you tell me what I want to know, I will not stop this mind probe on you. You have far too much valuable information in your brain that I cannot afford to not to see.”

Tony swallowed. He’d find out everything.

“Continue, Maw,” instructed the Titan.

Tony winced as the needles continued their work, twisting inside his brain, electing electrical surges, forcing his memories out for them to view. Tony locked his fingers into fists in an attempt of defiance. The images continued to flash forward showing Thanos the outcome of his philosophy as the Earth struggled to move on in the light of losing half of its population in one fell swoop.

“You married later than you did here,” mused Thanos. He was now seeing the small ceremony Tony and Pepper had had for their wedding after the Decimation.

Please don’t show him Morgan. Please don’t –

Tony’s inner protestations didn’t work.

“You have a child…”

Tony could see Morgan as a baby in his head, her chubby little cheeks, and waft of brown hair and her small nose as he held her in his arms a few months after she had been born. Her tiny fingers wrapped around his index finger and she gurgled sleepily as they sat out on the porch together watching the stars above the sky.

The memories went by more slowly as Thanos sought to see everything of Morgan. It was a form of torture for Tony, forcing him to see his life with Morgan before the Avengers had turned up to ask for his help.

Each memory tore Tony’s heart. Morgan didn’t exist yet and she may now never exist especially if Thanos killed him once he had learned what Tony had done with the Stones. It could be possible killing Tony would mean the Infinity Stones power would be released from him, enabling Thanos to use it himself, especially considering Tony still wasn’t able to access them himself. And he had no chance of doing so whilst chained to this slab.

An image of Morgan paused in the air above them. Wetness adorned Tony’s eyes as he saw his beautiful, little girl, projected above him.

“A daughter… Such a lovely creature…”

“Don’t you dare!” yelled Tony, anger coursing through him.

Thanos smirked. “She does not yet exist. She may never exist. After I am done with you, you will die. The threat you pose to me will end. With all the power of the Stones at my disposal, I can will your daughter into existence and she will become my daughter.”

“NO!” Tony tried to pull himself free, could feel hotness in his chest as he tried with all his might to break free.

Thanos smirked. “Yes. Ebony Maw would love to have another little sister to take care of, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, my lord,” Ebony Maw bowed his head, ensuring Tony could see his action.
Tony tugged at his restraints. “If you dare touch her -!”

“You’ll do what, Stark? You’ll be dead. You will not be able to stop me.”

Tony couldn’t stop the few tears from falling from his eyes. He knew what Thanos had done to Nebula. He couldn’t stand the thought Morgan may suffer the same way.

Thanos stepped away; satisfied he’d caused his prisoner enough mental pain for now. “Let’s continue. What else are you hiding from me, Stark?”

Images continued to flash past as the needles continued to bury themselves inside Tony’s brain. With each little push, a little gasp was pushed from his mouth as Tony lay there, his body feeling weak from the amount of mental pressure being put on his brain.

“Fascinating, you invented time travel…” Thanos said. “This is how you came back… Did you go too far, Stark, and end up here and decided to stay? Did you kill the other version of yourself in order to slot yourself in? How did you make yourself younger?”

Tony didn’t answer. Thanos would soon find out the full truth. At the moment he didn’t care. He wanted this to be over.

“My lord,” Ebony Maw said quietly, “this isn’t how he came back…”

Thanos returned his attention to the images. They saw as the Time Heist unfolded and Tony’s return to the Avengers Compound in 2023 after obtaining the Infinity Stone he had been after. What followed was reliving the Battle of Earth and for Tony that was devastating, knowing what was to come. It wouldn’t be long before Thanos would see he’d just wake up in the past after dying.

Thanos seemed particularly fascinated by his own attack on Earth. He didn’t seem to be aware this was an alternate version of himself the Avengers were fighting.

And that was when it happened.

Alternate Thanos had the glove with all the Stones in, battled Captain Marvel off like she was an irritating fly and was about to snap his fingers to end all life in the universe when Tony tackled him.

“You’re brave to try that…” smirked Thanos to his captive.

Tony gritted his teeth.

Thanos’ expression changed as it was revealed Tony had taken the Stones himself, said a witty one-liner and snapped his fingers.

Just moments later Tony watched himself die.

Thanos stepped back slightly and looked at his prisoner. “You died… How come you are here?”

Tony bit his lower lip. “I don’t know. I just… just…”

Ebony Maw interrupted his words. “My lord?”

“What is it?” hissed Thanos.

Ebony Maw paused, scrutinising the screen. “Sire, there is something here… In his brain. A
barrier… He’s hiding something from us. He does have defences.”

Thanos stood over Tony’s trembling form. “What are you hiding, Stark?”

Tony’s teeth chattered together. “No…thing…” He had no idea what this barrier was in his brain. Why did he have one? Why weren’t his memories of waking up in 2016 being projected out? What was this barrier?

What concerned him most was Thanos’ instructions to Maw. “Break it down. I want to know what he’s hiding.”

“My calculations predict a high pulse frequency, followed by needles inserted into the neural pathway should break the barrier down. It is risky… We could fry his brain.” Ebony Maw stated.

“Do it,” ordered Thanos. “We still need to find out what he’s done with the Infinity Stones. What we’ve seen so far shows a life he already lived and died in. Those memories do not help us now. This barrier may be the key to giving us all the information we need.”

If there was one thing Tony knew was that Thanos could not be allowed to break down that barrier. It was eliciting fear in him as he wondered what was hidden behind it. Why was he feeling terrified of what was hidden from him?

“I do not believe he knows what is hidden behind this barrier…” Ebony Maw concluded. “His vitals are changing, showing concern but also confusion…” He peered at Tony. “Memories after death?”

Tony could feel his heart rate spiking, could feel the fear pulsing through him and he had no idea why it was terrifying him so much. Whatever was behind the barrier Thanos had found inside his memories, a part of him must still have ingrained feelings of what they were. It was enough to cause this reaction in him.

“The high pulse frequency has been calculated. The needles are repositioning now.”

Tony couldn’t help but scream as the needles pulled out of his brain, repositioned themselves and then viciously pushed back into the base of his skull. He would have leapt off the slab if he’d been free. He couldn’t stop screaming.

“A crack has formed in the barrier,” advised Ebony Maw over Tony’s screams.

“Again,” instructed Thanos. “Until it breaks down.”

The needles retracted and then were pushed back in.

Tony’s screams only got louder. His throat hurt and he knew he would not be able to take much more of this.

The needles were pulled out again and he jerked, screamed as they were inserted once again.

Flashes appeared in front of his eyes, flickering memories he knew he had never experienced but were there, closed off behind this barrier that Thanos was forcing Maw to break down.

*Six figures stood around him as he lay on a flat surface.*

“We’re sorry we have to do this to you…” One stroked his burnt and bloodied face.

*He gurgled blood.*
“It is necessary…” another replied.

“What is this?” hissed Thanos.

Tony’s body was shaking as much as it was possibly able to do in his bonds. He was terrified, utterly terrified.

Tony was naked. The six figures were moving around him, touching, prodding, healing his injuries.

“She cannot handle our power… No human can.”

“Then we must remake him.”

More flashes erupted in front of his eyes.

His throat was sore from screaming. “NO! STOP! PLEASE! DON’T! NO MORE! LET ME DIE!”

He tried to fight them off.

They grabbed his head, pushing needles into his brain, injecting fluids directly into his brain, pushing more needles all over his body.

“Your cells need to be changed, Tony…”

“You need it…”

“Sire, this is-”

Maw’s voice was cut off as Tony screamed as his whole body grew so hot, burning hot and something seemed to erupt from his body, an almighty flash and everything went dark.

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When Tony woke he was lying on the floor of the torture chamber. His head ached and hurt as if his brain was pounding against his skull, desperate to be let out. He rubbed it gently. “What? What happened?” Gently, he shook his head and raised his head.

He was not alone.

But he was the only one awake.

Both Thanos and Squidward were lying unconscious on the floor.

“Did… did I do that?” he asked, talking to himself.

But what drew his attention was the Space Stone, glittering in Thanos’ Gauntlet.

Legs shaky and arms weak, Tony managed to haul himself across the room towards Thanos’ prone body. He reached out for the Stone and plucked it straight from the Gauntlet, letting it roll into the palm of his hand.

The last Infinity Stone… He had retrieved the last Infinity Stone!

As he watched, the Space Stone began to sink into the palm of his hand, his hand and then his whole arm shining blue as he absorbed it, the warmth feeling in his chest appearing and then fading as the Stone fully sunk into his hand.
He couldn’t help but smile despite the dire situation he was in. He’d got the Stones… All of them…

“Give that back, Stark!”

Tony hadn’t noticed Thanos had risen from his slumber.

Scrambling backward, Tony tried to get to his feet but his whole body felt like it was going to crumble. He was tired, so very tired.

Thanos was already up and moving towards him, grabbing a dagger from one of the other tables in the room. “You’re dead, Stark. There is no escaping me this time!” He cocked his head slightly to the side, a nasty smile crossing his face. “And your precious little girl will be mine.”

“NO! YOU WON’T EVER TOUCH HER!” Tony bellowed.

“Yes, she will,” smiled Thanos. “In your head are the plans for time travel. I could create my own and take her from the future.”

“If you kill me, she won’t ever exist,” stated Tony, though he knew that wasn’t the case. If Nebula had known the concept of time travel, it was likely Thanos did too.

Thanos stalked forward. “Nothing is set in stone. If your original timeline still exists, I will take her from there. If one can move back in time as you did originally, one can always move forward. Believe me, I will find a way to bring your precious daughter back here and turn her into one of my own children.”

No, not Morgan! Definitely not Morgan!

Tony moved back, attempting to get to his feet but Thanos was there, dagger in his left hand. Attempting to ward his attacker off, Tony grabbed Thanos’ wrist with his right hand, trying to push it back. His knees were buckling under the strain of trying to force Thanos back.

His chest was warming.

Thanos grabbed Tony’s left wrist, wrestling to push it back, moving Tony further back to advance the dagger towards Tony’s chest, for a killing blow.

“You cannot beat me, Stark.” Thanos hissed, pushing the dagger further down.

Tony snarled, gritting his teeth together as he continued to push back. “You may beat me, but you will never touch my DAUGHTER!”

There was a flash of light blinding them both momentarily, Thanos almost losing his grip on Tony’s left wrist.

As their vision returned, Tony couldn’t help but notice the glow surrounding his body. His hands were showing cascades of energy of six different colours: yellow, green, red, purple, orange and blue.

The colours of the Infinity Stones.

He felt burning power rushing up his arms, invigorating his tired and bruised body.

“What the-?” Thanos gasped, his face becoming darker and more menacing as he witnessed the power covering Tony’s entire body.
Tony’s whole body was alight with dazzling energy.

Staring Thanos in the face, and with all his might, Tony pushed the Titan back, finally freeing himself from the monster’s grip.

Tony breathed in deep breaths, stood with his legs apart; feeling stronger and healthier then he had been in a long time.

He held up his glowing, multi-coloured hand. “Now, Thanos, where were we?”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Another cliffhanger, hopefully, a better one than the one I left at the end of the last
chapter? Once again, thank you to my wonderful friend/artist/illustrator for their brilliant piece for this chapter of Tony’s powers unleashing.

Just a few points I’d like to make:

1) Thanos is a lot more conversational in this chapter. He is more like his Infinity War self where he does talk to his opponents more as opposed to his Endgame self where he is far more interested in fighting and killing than talking.

2) Thanos has been gathering a lot of intelligence on Tony since New York, and has upped his surveillance upon him meaning he did have people watching from afar when Tony and Pepper married...

3) Tony was referring to Ebony Maw as Squidward for a while in this chapter and then went to Maw when things got quite serious for him. He lost his jokey demeanour as he realised how much serious trouble he was in.

4) Realistically, Thanos threats to Morgan are only possible if he gets all the Stones and creates her since if he kills Tony, Morgan will not ever be conceived. It would be Thanos’ ultimate punishment for Tony, to take and corrupt Morgan.

5) Tony’s powers and the way they are illustrated do bare a resemblance to Captain Marvel’s however he has the power of the universe at his hands, whereas Carol only had the Space Stone’s influence. So their appearance with their powers may be similar, but Tony has so many abilities now he’s unleashed them, there will be vast differences between them.

The next chapter is entitled: Tony Unleashed!

To be posted next Sunday 9th February 2020!

Until then,
the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty-Six: No Control

Chapter Summary

Tony attempts to use his powers...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Bit of a later update than I had planned for... This chapter was difficult to write, partly because my brain wasn't letting me write it. In the end, I had to rethink this chapter, which has resulted in this chapter having a title change too as it was originally 'Tony Unleashed' now it is 'No Control', so, erm, yes you shall see!

As a result of the change of plans and narrative at the last minute, this chapter is shorter than I intended it to be and probably a lot less epic than you were all expecting so I'd like to apologise for this in advance! My creative brain made me do it...

I hope you still like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

No Control

Wednesday 30th May 2018

Sanctuary II

Fizzling with crackling energy Tony stood there, a slight smile on his lips as he watched Thanos observe him. The Titan seemed shocked by his appearance, of the glowing masses of energy circling Tony’s entire body, the power pouring from his fingertips.

“How is this possible?” Thanos seemed genuinely shocked by Tony’s ethereal appearance. “You’re human…”

“Maybe everything you know about me is all a lie?” suggested Tony, keeping his palm trained on Thanos, knowing full well the Titan was now wary of him, perhaps even hesitance in attacking him. His body was still crackling with energy. He tipped his head to the side.

Thanos’ expression changed to one of derision. “No. There is more to you than meets the eye. The memories we uncovered when we forced the barrier down in your mind, showed a suffering a normal human being could never have survived.”

“What memories?” Tony paused wondering what Thanos meant. Was he referring to Afghanistan?
Thanos didn’t reply, only stood there scrutinising Tony, his eyes moving carefully as he studied his prisoner.

“What memories do you mean?” Tony tried again, allowing frustration to come into the lilt of his voice.

“Memories after death, Tony Stark,” explained Thanos. “There is a barrier in your brain, one we broke down. It appears it unleashed memories that have been hidden from you, yet still reside within you. These powers you have must be tied to these memories I saw. We’ve watched you for a long time. Never before have you exhibited such power.” The Titan stepped menacingly forward. “Do you even know how to control this energy?”

Tony cracked his knuckles. He hoped he would be able to. He was still crackling with energy, the glow surrounding his whole body, not fading even though he didn’t feel like he was using his powers. “It doesn’t matter if I can control this energy or not, all it matters is that I can beat you with it.” His cockiness would be sure to anger Thanos, hopefully, goad him into making some mistakes of his own.

“You won’t,” smiled Thanos. “I wonder what your future daughter would think of you now?”

Tony’s nostrils flared. His whole body flickered brighter than before. “Don’t you dare mention her again!” His palm, which had remained trained upon the Titan, flared brighter and a beam of energy shot out of his palm, startling Tony by its sudden appearance, and causing Thanos to just about successfully evade it.

Tony stared at his fingers, wriggling them as he watched the multi-coloured glistening energy circulate around his body. His head was fuzzy, almost buzzing, and he wasn’t sure if it was something to do with his powers finally unleashing or whatever Thanos had done to his brain about a barrier. His curiosity was sated. Tony wanted to know what this barrier was for, why did he have one in his brain?

To protect you.

The voices were back. Tony nearly scoffed at their attempt to help him now but he held back. He couldn’t afford to be distracted. Thankfully they didn’t say anything more.

“You didn’t mean to do that, did you?” Thanos smirked, watching Tony his eyes glistening with amusement at his foe’s reaction to the beam of energy that had been unleashed.

Tony got into a defensive position. “I think I meant to do it.” The trouble was he didn’t seem to know how his powers had activated, nor did he know what he was doing. Thanos had been about to kill him when he’d threatened Morgan and Tony’s anger over it appeared to have activated his powers. He’d succeeded in pushing Thanos away from him, using the strength that he hadn’t had before. And just now Morgan had been brought up again and his involuntary reaction had been to protect her, even if she didn’t currently exist yet.

Morgan...

His eyes widened as realisation hit.

He wanted to protect his loved ones. He’d sacrificed himself to ensure Morgan’s life could continue, even if it meant she would never remember him. He’d been given a second chance and he was doing everything in his power to ensure Morgan didn’t have to face the horrors of the world he had. And yet, despite his efforts, Thanos still threatened her. Even if he managed to kill Tony...
before she was conceived, Thanos intended to still bring her into the world with the Infinity Stones. And he could not let that happen.

Thanos had destroyed Nebula’s life. He was not about to do the same thing to Morgan.

“I will not let you do to my daughter what you did to yours!” Tony’s eyes flared angrily and the glow surrounding his body shined brighter.

“We’ll see about that.”

Closing his eyes, Tony took a deep breath, allowing himself a sense of calm, where he thought of Morgan and the moment she had been born and his promise to her – I’ll protect you always - before he reached out and stepped back, even as Thanos swung for him in his moment of vulnerability.

Tony moved fast, enhanced by his powers, grasping Thanos’ arm, seemingly stronger than the Titan himself, and pushed back against him. Gritting his teeth, Tony snarled at him. “You don’t know what I’m capable of!”

“Neither do you, Stark,” stated Thanos. “Your anger is fuelling these powers you have. You are incapable of controlling them, giving me the advantage I need against you.”

Glaring at Thanos, Tony denied him an answer. He was right though. He could sense he didn’t know how to properly use them without giving in to his anger and he felt certain that following that route was not the path he was supposed to tread. But if he had these powers how was he supposed to use them? The voices did not seem to be in a mood to help him now, despite their advice earlier, and this was the time he would need it!

Cursing his misfortune at the inappropriate time his powers had decided to show themselves, Tony sought for a way to escape, knowing Thanos would have taken all precautions necessary to prevent his prized prisoner from escaping.

Thanos’ next words threw him off guard, so unexpected they were. “Tell me, what was it like to die?”

Tony paused, surprised by the question. He was alert to any attack. Ebony Maw was still unconscious on the floor so he didn’t have to worry about him, it was the Titan he had to be concerned about. Dying had been terrifying. He’d known he was leaving his loved ones behind and that had hurt worst of all. But he’d died knowing he’d saved them, even if it meant he’d never see them again. He’d held on just so he could see Pepper one last time, so he could see her face as the light left his eyes…

Panic started to rise within Tony and his heart began to pump faster as his mind became trapped in the nightmare of what death had felt like, the memories tearing into his brain, distracting him…

…which is exactly what Thanos wanted.

Taking advantage of the situation, Thanos leaped for Tony, reaching out but at the last moment, Tony drew himself out of the memories and the feelings engulfing him and flung himself out the way, floating into the air, away from Thanos’ attack. His body was glowing brighter as he tried to control his movements.

Could he… fly?

Tony twisted in mid-air, trying to lower himself to the ground.
“Clever,” smirked Thanos. “What other abilities do you have? The more you show me, the more I can assess you.”

Tony swallowed. “You won’t be able to keep me prisoner.”

“I can and I will. There is no way for you off this ship. You may cause havoc upon it with your uncontrollable abilities but I will still win. I will still detain you once again.”

Tony somehow doubted that. Despite Thanos’ assurances that he thought he had the upper-hand, Tony recognised he was the one who did. He couldn’t control his abilities, nor figure out how to properly unleash them but there had to be some element he was missing and if he could figure out what it was, he would be unstoppable. Not knowing how to use his powers was his advantage, he’d be able to surprise Thanos with random attacks.

His outbursts seem to be linked to his emotions.

That had to be the key he was missing.

Tony grimaced. If he survived this and managed to return home he’d have to take time to learn how to use his powers. At the moment it was guess-work. Anger did seem to be the key emotion that enabled him to let loose bursts of power.

He was still floating in the air, hovering gently, and the ethereal glow around his body just that tiny bit brighter.

“We could learn much from one another, Tony Stark,” said Thanos quietly.

Tony scoffed. “No, we can’t. We may be similar in some aspects but in others, we are completely different. There is no you and I. There are only us as enemies.” He raised his hand again, pointing it at the Titan.

“And Ebony too,” stated Thanos calmly.

“Wha-?” Tony tried to turn in mid-air but something struck him from behind and he went flying, hitting the wall with a sickening thud and he fell back to the floor. “Ow.” He hadn’t noticed Squidward recover.

The glow around his body seemed to recede.

“Interesting…” mused Thanos, standing in front of Tony’s upside body.

Rolling over, Tony climbed to his feet so he stood in front of the Titan, fists clenched at his sides, a look of pure loathing decorating his face.

“No powers now, Stark?” Thanos reached forward.

Tony raised his hands to block Thanos but the Titan grabbed him by the skull, picking him up and allowing him to hang in the air. He struggled but couldn’t free himself. The glow around his body was gone. God-damn it, why did it have to disappear when I need it?

The fact he had no true control over his powers was frustrating.

Thanos squeezed his skull. “I could kill you right here, right now.”

“Do it then,” spat Tony, grabbing hold of Thanos’ thick arm, scrabbling at the fingers that clutched his head tightly.
Thanos started to squeeze and Tony winced as pain rocked through his head. He knew his skull would crack if Thanos kept up the pressure. Closing his eyes, Tony attempted to pull back the pressure but couldn’t.

“You wanted me to kill you, Stark, and I will,” said Thanos.

Tony grimaced. He probably shouldn’t have baited him but at the moment he was focused on trying to stop the intense pain running through his skull. He was sure by now hairline fractures were starting to form as the Titan increased the pressure.

He was feeling hot again, the warmth spreading from his chest and Tony opened his eyes to see his body alight once more and he twisted in Thanos’ grip and punched the Titan square in his jaw. The resulting punch shook Thanos and it was enough to force him to drop Tony, who landed on his feet, holding up his burning fist.

“I’m strong too. Care to test me again?” snarled Tony. Knowing he had a chance to beat down Thanos while he had this sort of strength at his disposal, he launched an attack, raising his fists again, kicking out at the Titan as he rushed him.

He threw Thanos back with a single kick to the gut.

Impressed, Tony swivelled on his feet to face Squidward. “Care to take me on?”

Ebony Maw snarled at him.

Tony smiled and raised his fist only for him to be shot in the back and he fell face forward.

Damn it!

“If you insist on fighting us then we will make sure you cannot use your powers. It seems you lose control each time you are injured,” said Thanos, approaching Tony from behind. “You cannot keep this up.” Behind him were hordes of gathering Chitauri.

Shit. Tony swallowed. He knew what was about to happen.

They intended to attack him with a larger force, keep him distracted so he wouldn’t be able to reactivate his powers.

“We will find out what you did with those Stones, Stark,” threatened Thanos. “You will only die when you have given me everything I need to know.”

“Yeah, I’m not in a giving mood lately,” replied Tony, shaking his head. He cast his gaze around. He could feel the warmth in his chest again, hovering just out of reach. What did he have to do to be able to use his powers? This was the time he needed them!

“Let’s see how you handle my army, shall we?” Thanos asked. He slid back through the ranks, Ebony Maw following him, allowing the Chitauri to encase Tony within a circle.

“Do not kill him. Injure or maim if you must but I want him alive. His brain is too important to be ruined permanently.” Thanos raised his arm and brought it down, stepping back as the Chitauri surged forward at Thanos’ command.

Tony desperately searched for a way out. He could surge through them, probably kill them all with his powers but his problem was that he didn’t know how to use them, and right now he couldn’t get them to work. His body was still vibrating with untapped energy and he could sense his powers
hovering just out of reach, he just wished he knew how to use it without looking like a novice who had no idea what he was doing.

Tony cast his gaze about, watching as the Chitauri advanced. He wouldn’t be able to take them out all at once unless he was able to maintain some semblance of control with his powers and keep them going if he was injured.

*What can I do?* He thought furiously. The one thing he wanted most in the world was to get out of here before Thanos invaded his mind again.

*You can escape...* The voices were back.

*How?* He retorted angrily. *In case you hadn’t noticed I’m surrounded!*

*You have the Space Stone.*

The answer came to him in a flash at the moment the voices said those words.

He *could* escape. *If the Space Stone could create portals to travel between great distances... does that mean I can too?*

His powers were linked to all of the Infinity Stones, he just had no way to control them efficiently to be much of a threat towards Thanos just yet, especially since they came with an ‘off’ switch.

Closing his eyes, Tony thought of home, of his family. Of the people who waited for his return back on Earth, and as he thought of Pepper and her warm eyes, he felt a tug in his chest. *Home. I want to go home.*

He opened his eyes just in time to see the Chitauri warriors leap at him as he disappeared in a flash of light.

**To be continued...**

*Chapter End Notes*

Please let me know what you think!

I think it is a far more interesting idea that Tony cannot fully use or control his powers yet though he can access them. He has to learn how to use them and them unleashing whilst a prisoner of Thanos is just circumstance.

The whole Tony Unleashed thing which was supposed to be in this chapter will not happen just yet... We've still got a way to go with this story!

Next chapter... we move back to the Avengers Compound as Natasha regroups them in the event of Tony's kidnap, and more importantly, will Tony make it home?

I think I'm working the late shift next weekend on Sunday so I hope to post before I leave for work so it will be earlier than my usual update time.

Until then,
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Returning Home

Chapter Summary

Nat imparts more information to the Avengers...

Chapter Notes

Afternoon!

Thank you for all the comments so far! I'm in the process of planning out the rest of the chapters for this story... At a best guess, it will be around 40 chapters. We are close to the end of the story... the Endgame is coming... So much more exciting stuff to come! And, yes, Ant-Man and the Wasp will appear! I haven't forgotten about them! This story has evolved a lot as I write it and originally I had another idea for their role but it had to be dropped... But they've both got a significant role to play to come!

I hope everyone enjoys this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Returning Home

Wednesday 30th May 2018

“What the hell just happened?” Bruce yelled in astonishment, mere seconds after the portal had vanished. “What? But that –” He shook his head.

“Tony?” whispered Pepper, her eyes shimmering with tears, focused on the space where Tony had been moments before.

“Tony?” whispered Pepper, her eyes shimmering with tears, focused on the space where Tony had been moments before.

“FRIDAY?” Rhodey asked, looking up at the ceiling. “Can you triangulate the energy signature?”

“No. It is of foreign origin. I am unable to trace it back to its source. I do not detect Mr. Stark on Earth.”

Steve winced. “I was afraid of that.”

“We have to get him back!” Pepper raised her voice. “We have to!”

“This was supposed to happen,” said Natasha quietly, keeping her head low. She’d known at some point Thanos would get his hands on Tony. It had been bound to happen. The Stones had told her as much on Vormir.

Everyone turned to look at her, surprise stretching across their faces. A few tears stained Pepper’s cheeks.
“Wait,” Bruce held up a hand, rubbing his forehead with the other. “Tony has the Stones? All of them?”

“Five of them,” admitted Natasha. “It’s… complicated…” She wasn’t sure how she could explain it. Not everyone was partial to the information she and Tony had died before coming back. Most believed they had simply been sent back in time.

“Tony has been absorbing them,” mentioned Steve quietly.

Bruce’s mouth hung open in surprise. “How? Why Tony?”

“He couldn’t do before we came back,” explained Natasha, “but since then, he’s had an affinity for the Stones.” She couldn’t let on what she knew, not just yet. Tony deserved to know first, that’s if he ever returned to them. She was certain he would.

“Why did you say this was supposed to happen?” asked Wanda quietly. Red energy flickered between her fingers as Tony’s kidnap had clearly agitated her. “I should have tried to do something to stop him from being taken.”

Natasha leaned forward and patted Wanda’s arm. “There are things about Tony and I most of you do not know. We kept it to ourselves for a reason…” She glanced at Bruce and Rhodey. “To protect ourselves.”

Rhodey pursed his lips together. “What have you been keeping from us?”

Natasha swallowed. She knew Tony wouldn’t be too happy if more people knew but she had no choice. “Pepper, Wanda, and Steve already know this part… But Tony and I were not sent back in time. We didn’t go to sleep one day and woke up back here in the past…”

Bruce paled. “No…”

“We both died.”

“What…?” Rhodey’s eyes widened. “How?”

“We tried to save the universe from Thanos. I died trying to get one of the Stones and as a result of this; I appear to have the abilities of one of the Stones.”

“The Soul Stone…” muttered Steve. “That’s what you were warning me about before Vormir.”

Natasha nodded. “A Soul for a Soul. I sacrificed myself so Clint could get the Soul Stone. Tony told me I succeeded… It was the only way to get the Stone. Tony died not long afterward… He sacrificed himself to save the universe, to stop Thanos from destroying everything. He used all six Stones…” She bowed her head, the heavy price Tony had paid to save everyone. “He was the only one close enough who could stop him… After we died, we woke up back here. There is more…”

Bruce reached for a glass of water before motioning for her to continue.

“You all know Tony has been absorbing the Stones as we collect them… Both of us have powers. I can read people’s Souls, and Tony and I share a link… We think once Tony has collected all the Stones, he will be able to use his own powers,” shared Natasha. It was important they knew this.

“When we collected the Soul Stone on Vormir last year, I sacrificed myself again but I survived this time. For us to retrieve the Space Stone, Tony had to be taken by Thanos. There was nothing I could do to stop it.”
“But Thanos will not give him a chance to get close enough to him to be able to take the Stone…” reasoned Steve. “Especially if he suspects Tony has collected all of them, whether he knows he’s been absorbing them or not.”

“Tony and I have a connection with one another… a bond of sorts,” admitted Natasha, continuing to drop the surprises, “and we hear a voice which advises us… I was told for Tony to be able to gain the Space Stone, he’d have to be taken by Thanos… I was never told when this would happen… If I’d known I would have tried to stop it from happening. I think Tony will come back to us. But our connection is also deeper. We can sense one another… It’s how I found Tony after Thaddeus Ross took him. It’s how I traced him… I knew he was being hurt.”

“You let this happen…” murmured Pepper, dry tears evident on her face.

“Pepper…”

The other woman held up her hand. “No, I understand, no matter how much I hate the idea you knew in advance.”

“The voice we hear can stop us from revealing things. I’ve been here for two years longer than Tony. I wasn’t allowed to change anything for two years until he arrived here,” Natasha revealed, her voice hard. “I had to sit through Hydra and Ultron, knowing I could do nothing to change it, no matter how hard I tried. I didn’t know it would be Tony who would be coming back… All I was told was someone else was coming and I had to wait.”

“Why were you here for two years before Tony?” asked Rhodey, putting forth the question which was pondering everyone.

Natasha shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I woke up in 2014, just before we exposed HYDRA. I tried to make changes, I couldn’t. Before I died, we had to collect the Infinity Stones from the past because Thanos had destroyed them in the present… Tony invented a time machine… Clint and I were sent to Vormir where one of us had to die. The year we chose was 2014 because one of the other Stones could be found in that year too. I suspect I woke up in 2014 as I died in that year. However, Tony died back in 2023 after all the Stones had been collected. He was the only one who could be classed as being properly sent back whereas I just woke up in the year I passed away in.”

“The voice you mentioned…” began Wanda, “do you know who it is?”

Natasha did but could she really say? “I do… But Tony doesn’t know yet though he has his suspicions. It wouldn’t be fair if you all knew and he didn’t. Tony and I are at the centre of the coming storm. We have to face Thanos.”

Pepper breathed out slowly. “Tony will be okay, won’t he?”

“I can’t promise anything but the Voice told me he had to be taken. They wouldn’t have allowed it if Tony wasn’t meant to make it back,” answered Natasha. She glanced around at them all.

“We have to wait then?” Rhodey leaned back in his chair. “Wait for him to pull off the Stark miracle as he did all those years ago in Afghanistan?”

“That we do,” she confirmed.

“Can’t you use your link to see if he’s alright?” queried Steve. “If you traced him to Ross, surely you can do the same this time?”
Natasha frowned. It was an excellent question and she had been pondering the idea herself. “I could try… But even if I did, we can’t rescue him. He’s not on the planet.”

Pepper’s face steeled. “It doesn’t matter. As long as I know he’s still alive…” Her right hand clutched her wedding ring on her left ring finger. “We still have so much more to live for.”

“I know,” murmured Natasha. “Okay, let’s go to Tony’s lab. If he’s going to return to us unexpectedly, he’ll return there.”

“How… how do you know that?” Bruce looked suspiciously at her.

Natasha grimaced. “Dunno… Just a feeling I have…”

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**Stark’s Lab**

**Avenger’s Compound**

“I sensed his power…” Wanda sat on a chair facing Natasha as the other woman sat cross-legged on a mat on the floor. “Tony’s, I mean. Ever since you two came back, he’s been buzzing with energy, as if it has been fighting to get out of him.”

“How powerful do you think Tony is?” Rhodey stood to the side, arms folded across his chest as they waited.

“More powerful than me,” Wanda answered.

“She’s right,” interrupted Natasha. “When I searched our bond, I saw his power too.” She leaned back slightly, placing her hands on her knees. “Ok, I’m going to see if I can trace him, feel him… Please no talking. It may distract me when I do not need it.”

Everyone agreed. Pepper, Bruce, and Steve sat to the side whilst Rhodey began to pace as Natasha closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. The last time she had been able to accurately trace him was because Tony had been in pain and this time she had felt nothing from him. Tony had been missing for a few hours now. Thanos had to be hurting him, so why hadn’t she felt his pain?

Maybe it is because our bond is now fully active on both sides ever since Tony and I absorbed the Soul Stone together. It was a reasonable assumption to make.

Instead, she decided to focus upon her own heart and her own soul. The Soul Stone was able to help her separate herself from her physical form to her soul form. Two separate entities merged together to form a single person. As she formed the connection, she could feel the souls of her friends around her, but they couldn’t sense her.

There was a heightened sense of worry and anxiety, mostly from Pepper and Rhodey emitting from them. Steve was calmer and determined and Wanda was angry and hopeful, all at once. Bruce was different. There was a green tinge to his soul, highlighting his connection to the Hulk. For now, the Hulk was asleep.

Passing on by them she reached out beyond the Compound, up and out, focusing on Tony. She felt herself leaving Earth, tracing their connection, following him to the other side of the universe. His soul was burning bright in the heavens above and now she could feel the pain he was in.

She nearly opened her mouth to scream as pain rocked over her entire body, engulfing her soul in a
cosmic storm of agony but it soon passed. Tony’s soul was burning brighter than before. Once it had a golden hue around it, now it vibrated with six different colours amongst the gold.

“Tony?”

He couldn’t hear her. She wasn’t looking out of his eyes like she had before either.

Her soul moved forward, reducing the length between them before she found herself hovering above a chamber in Thanos’ ship. She could see Tony, his body alight with different colours as he floated in the air.

_Wait, Tony can fly?_

She could hear what they were saying to one another.

_“We could learn much from one another, Tony Stark,”_ said Thanos.

Tony scoffed. _“No, we can’t. We may be similar in some aspects but in others, we are completely different. There is no you and I. There are only us as enemies.”_ He raised his hand and pointed it at the Titan.

Natasha saw one of the Black Order sneaking up behind Tony but no words verbalised from her mouth as she sought to warn him of the danger. It was too late as Tony was struck from behind and he went flying, hitting the wall with a sickening thud and he fell back to the floor.

Natasha winced. _But he’s got all the Stones…_

She wanted to help him but all she was, was just an invisible spectator to this event, utilising her bond with Tony to see if he was alright. Yet she couldn’t. He was completely alone…

_He is not alone, Natasha Romanoff_, the Voice reverberated in her mind. _He has us…_

She swallowed; assessing the information she had just been given. _Then help him escape_, she pleaded.

_He will escape. We would not have ensured he came here if he was not supposed to escape. We spent two years changing him to be what we needed him to be. We will not lose him today._

The Voice’s assurances were not very comforting, but it was all Natasha had to rely on.

_He will be home soon_, the Voice added. _You should wait there. It will not be long._

Natasha didn’t want to leave. She wanted to see how this would play out. Her soul was moving backward of its own accord, and she vanished from the ship, back out into space and sent spiralling back to Earth and back to her own body in the middle of Tony’s lab.

She came too with a great gasp of air, slumping back and falling flat-out on the floor. She felt exhausted. Mentally drained too.

“Nat!” Bruce bounded over to her, kneeling down beside her. “Are you alright?”

Natasha closed her eyes briefly. “Yeah… just feel really weak…”

“You were shaking,” said Wanda, “and you were pale.”

Natasha tried to sit up, her body still shaking. “I think I overstrained myself…”
“Did you see Tony?” questioned Pepper quietly, rubbing Natasha’s shoulders for her.

“I did. He’s alive. And I think he’s got the last Infinity Stone.”

“How do you know?” queried Steve, passing her a glass of water which Natasha drank quickly to soothe her sudden dehydrated mouth and throat.

“Bit difficult to miss when his body is glowing and he’s floating in the air,” she admitted. “I heard the Voice again. It told me he would be home soon…”

“Do we know how soon?” Rhodey continued to pace, arms behind his back in worry.

“Not sure…” she admitted. Her chest began to warm suddenly, a sensation she had rarely felt and then there was –

“I am detecting a large spike of energy reading in this very lab,” FRIDAY warned before there was a flash, and a portal appeared and Tony was stumbling out of it, landing with a thud on his front as the portal disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

“Tony!” Ignoring the exhaustion rocking her body, Natasha pushed herself to her feet and rushed over to Tony, rolling him onto his back. “You’re here!”

“What?” Tony groaned, “You were not expecting me so soon?” He coughed. His face was covered with bruises and parts of his clothes were torn and shredded. He sat up.

“TONY!” Pepper pulled him into a hug, kissing him on the cheek.

“Ow,” he grunted, but ignored the pain and pulled Pepper into a deeper hug. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Pepper asked.

“I thought of you and our home… and then I was here. You saved me again, Mrs. Stark.”

Pepper couldn’t help the tears sliding down her cheeks. “I won’t ever stop saving you.”

Tony smiled at her. He glanced around at the others, all with relieved expressions on their faces. “Did you miss me that much?”

“You got snatched from right in front of us by the monster you’ve been warning us about,” stated Rhodey. “How the hell are we supposed to react when you return to us quite unexpectedly?”

Tony grinned. “Point. You should know I have the ability to do the most impossible things…”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Oh, we know, Tones… We know.”

Natasha still felt tired but she needed to hear from Tony what had happened to him. Though she had seen a brief glimpse she was sure the others were dying to know too. “What happened to you?”


“I’ll get it,” said Steve, rushing off to retrieve Tony and Natasha another cup of water each.


She grinned. “I used our link to search for you… I found you… saw a bit and then got yanked back here. It drained me… I think the distance was the problem.”
“Oh…” Tony nodded. “Hmm, makes sense.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “So, tell us. What happened to you?”

“Thanos toyed with me for a bit. Threw me around like a ragdoll with the Space Stone and then dumped me into a pit full of those warriors of his that attacked New York. He wanted to know what I’d done with the Stones. I refused.”

“Good.” Natasha knew how important it was that Thanos never found out what Tony could do.

“He turned nasty…” Tony admitted. “He used a device on me which could project memories out of my mind so Thanos could see them.”

“Shit,” whispered Steve.

“Language,” muttered Tony.

“He saw everything… All my life before we came here… He realised I’d travelled back in time. He saw I’d fought him before. Pep… he threatened you… He’s been watching us for a while now. He had agents observing our wedding day… I think it has been since Xandar…possibly even before then too. He always knew who I was when I fought him on Titan. Just lately I’ve been under more surveillance.”

“How did he realise you’d travelled back?” asked Wanda.

“He saw how the Accords were handled. My memories were a different story. They didn’t go well before… A huge rift was torn in the Avengers because of them. But Nat and I made sure we handle them well enough the divide didn’t happen. He saw himself win. Saw my life after Thanos had won…” He choked back a sob. “He saw… Mo…” He nearly said Morgan’s name but stopped himself.

“Our future child…” Pepper realised.

Tony nodded. “Yeah. He threatened them. He saw my death…” He glanced at Bruce and Rhodey. “Sorry, that’s something we neglected to men-”

Natasha held up a hand. “I told them. They know.”

“Of. Right.” Tony swallowed. “He saw my death but they couldn’t see further… They found a bar-rier in my memories, something I can’t even remember even now. They tried to break it down.”

Shit. Natasha realised what they had found. Tony’s memories of the two years he’d spent with the Infinity Stones.

“They broke the barrier down… I don’t remember what they saw, all I know was that I was in a lot of pain during the mind-reading and I blacked out. The next thing I knew I was free, waking up on the floor and found both Thanos and his Squidward son unconscious on the floor. I took the only opportunity I had and retrieved the Space Stone from his Gauntlet… I wasn’t careful enough. Thanos saw… I don’t think he knows I absorbed it, only that I have somehow concealed it with my person. He was trying to kill me when I stopped him…” He sighed, his shoulders drooping. “I got all the Stones and I can use the power I have, just not very well. I barely escaped.”

“You made it back though.” Natasha smiled, pleased to see him.

“Yeah.” Tony glanced at his hands. “I need to learn how to use these powers, ‘cos, either way,
Thanos is coming for me. I’m the key he needs to destroy the universe… There’s probably some way he can use me, and we can’t let it happen.”

Natasha agreed. A brief image flashed in her mind. When she’d been conversing with Soul on Vormir, she’d seen flashes of the future. One of them had been of Tony held in a machine, his body shimmering in six different colours… She’d been shown it for a reason. “We won’t let him use you, Tony.”

The others shook their heads, agreeing with her.

“If Thanos needs you to destroy the universe, he will not succeed. We will not let him,” she vowed. “And once you can control these powers, he will have no way of beating you or forcing you to surrender.” She flickered her gaze over to Pepper. “And if he thinks he can use Pepper against you? He won’t. We’ll protect her too.”

Tony’s lips twitched at the side. “Thank you.”

Natasha reached out and rubbed him on the shoulder in a friendly gesture.

Steve cleared his throat. “I think you both need to rest. Tony, you’ve been through a lot in a short space of time, and Nat, you need to sleep.”

She couldn’t argue with that assertion.

“Tomorrow,” stated Tony.

“Tomorrow?” she queried.

Tony nodded towards her and Wanda. “You, Wanda and me in the training area. We need to work out these powers I have before it is too late.”


Tony raised an eyebrow at her. “If you do, I will too.”

She laughed. “Fine, I will.”

Tony’s lips pulled upwards. “Good.”

In the end, they both slept for hours.

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Thursday 31st May 2018

Sanctuary II

“I have news, sire.” Ebony Maw bowed before Thanos, rising only when his father motioned for him to do so.

“What have you learned?”

“I have observed all of the recordings taken of Stark. The Stone he took from the Gauntlet he absorbed. It went into his body…”

Thanos leaned forward, assimilating the new information. “How is it possible he can do that?”
“The hidden memories we uncovered… Trying to break the barrier down caused them to break free. The resulting backlash affected all of us. Stark was the first one to wake. He would have seen the memories himself yet does not recall them. He was emitting energy signatures afterward which I have been able to analyse from the footage alone.”

“Can they be identified?” asked Thanos.

Ebony Maw inclined his head. “They match the energy emitting from the Infinity Stones which would be understandable if he somehow has the ability to absorb them and use their powers.”

“Powers he has only just discovered…” Thanos leaned forward. “The Stones can only be wielded by one who is worthy, who is strong enough to channel their power. A human body is too frail to hold the magnitude of the universe within it. The Power Stone alone would burn his body to ash in an instant. So, how can he survive?”

“I believe the hidden memories may hold a clue for us. Every memory we extracted from his brain has been recorded by our cameras… including these hidden ones.”

“Show them,” Thanos ordered, waving a hand to tell Ebony Maw to proceed.

Maw pressed a few buttons on a remote he held in his hand before the flickering images of Stark’s hidden memories appeared in the air in front of them.

Six figures stood around Stark as he lay on a flat surface.

“We’re sorry we have to do this to you…” One stroked the man’s burnt and bloodied face.

Blood dripped out the sides of his mouth.

“It is necessary…” another replied.

Stark was naked. The six figures were moving around him, touching, prodding, and healing his injuries.

“He cannot handle our power… No human can.”

“Then we must remake him.”

Stark was screaming hoarsely as he attempted to fight them off. “NO! STOP! PLEASE! DON’T! NO MORE! LET ME DIE!”

They grabbed his head, pushing needles into his brain, injecting fluids directly into his brain, pushing more needles all over his body.

“Your cells need to be changed, Tony…”

“You need it…”

“That is all we have,” confirmed Ebony Maw.

“Those six figures are the universal personification of the six Infinity Stones,” deduced Thanos. “They are sentient to the universe. Those are the figures in the memories. It does not surprise me they have a will of their own. It takes great strength and determination to wield all six and bend them to your own will. The Stones changed Stark. Gave him the ability to absorb their powers. They’d be safe with him, no one would know where they have disappeared to.” Thanos’ expression became menacing. “They underestimated me.”
“It may be possible to harness the energy within Stark with the correct equipment,” suggested Maw. “At the moment he is dangerous with uncontrolled powers. It may be easier to extract them from him.”

“He’ll be on his guard now,” advised Thanos, “waiting for us to strike. We’ll do so when he least expects it. If the only way to obtain the Infinity Stones is to drain them from Stark, then that is what I shall do. Set a course for Nidavellir. I require Eitri’s services to craft me a device to do just that…”

He may have to wait a tiny bit longer than he had hoped he would but Thanos knew it wouldn’t be long until he had achieved the reality he wanted for the universe. He would save it, and all with Tony Stark’s help.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Thanos has guessed who the six figures are - and it is a fair assumption to make. His intentions to use Tony may be his only way of acquiring the power of the Stones. If he cannot acquire the Stones himself, he can always try to harness them from their source...

The next few chapters will be the lead-up to the final confrontation. And, boy, there is a lot of great stuff to come. Hopefully, I manage to tie up all the plot points I’ve set up so far in this story.

Next week: Tony begins his training to learn how to use his powers... To be posted Sunday 23rd February...

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Powers Unlocked

Chapter Summary

Natasha makes a discovery about Tony's powers...

Chapter Notes

Erm... hello *waves*

Sorry for the lack of update last week. I hit a huge roadblock with this chapter. It wasn't budging at all. And then I finally fixed it yesterday when I then wrote this entire chapter in under 24 hours... I'm not sure if I will be able to keep to weekly updates but I will try my best too. We are getting so close to the end now.

You'll notice I have updated the chapter count. The rest of the story is fully planned out. Hopefully by end of May this story will be finished!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Powers Unlocked

Thursday 31st May 2018

Avengers Compound

Training Rooms

It had been a hard and difficult day for Tony. He’d arrived early that morning, ready to train with Wanda, and learn more about his new abilities. They’d started by discussing each Infinity Stone Tony had absorbed, before determining which abilities were linked to each Stone when Tony had been on-board Thanos ship using them for the first time.

They had established Tony’s ability to teleport must originate from the Space Stone and that the energy beams from his hands were by-products of the Power Stone. However the problem was Tony simply could not control them or summon them when he wanted to.

Wanda had started off attacking him in an effort to get his powers to show themselves. Even when she threw him across the room, they did not appear. The tendrils of power from her own fingertips were able to throw Tony around the room with hardly any effort.

He was bruised and battered by the afternoon, wincing slightly in pain. “I’m not sure you attacking me is working, Wanda,” Tony had said. “I think we need to try something different.”

“Like what?”
“Make me angry. That seemed to work before,” he’d suggested.

Wanda had blinked at him in surprise. “You’re not gonna turn into the Hulk are you?”

Tony had laughed and shaken his head. “No. I’m not.”

And so Wanda had tried Tony’s suggestion, making threats against him, saying things designed to make Tony angry. Yet, because he knew Wanda didn’t really mean what she said, he couldn’t get angry.

No matter what they tried they could not manifest any of Tony’s powers.

He returned to his quarters frustrated and annoyed at his lack of progress.

Tony lay back on his bed, running his hands over his face. Pepper was busy with *Stark Industries* otherwise she would be here with him. She’d been called away to an urgent meeting earlier that morning and he’d had not had a chance to see her. He doubted he’d see her for a few days.

“Wanda said you’d had trouble manifesting your powers today.”

Tony jumped, flinging his arms out and sending out a beam of energy from his hands.

There was a yelp and he turned to see the hole he’d made in the wall, and kneeling down below it was Natasha, hands over her head. “TONY!”

Tony winced. “Sorry?” He glanced at his hands. “That’s the first sign of powers I’ve had all day. And I nearly killed you with it.”

“I did sneak up on you…” Natasha said. “I asked FRIDAY to let me in discreetly.”

“Yeah, don’t do that,” he advised. “Last thing I want is to find I’ve accidentally killed someone because they sneak up on me.”

Natasha raised her hands. “Won’t happen again. It did confirm a theory though.”

Tony’s eyebrows crinkled as he considered her words. “Unexpected surprises and events trigger my powers?”

She nodded. “I’m wondering if your powers are not fully realised yet.”

“We know they’re not,” he replied. “I cannot even harness them correctly without needing to be shocked into making them materialise. I’m not sure how we can fix this, or am I supposed to fight Thanos with the occasional energy blast and defeat him that way?”

Natasha sat down on the bed next to Tony. “I think I need to examine you.”

“Err… what?” Tony wasn’t sure what she meant.

She chuckled. “Not *that* way, Stark.”

“Wasn’t even thinking it,” he defended.

Natasha shook her head, a slight grin pulling at the edge of her lips. “Do you remember when I was waiting for Carol to arrive in August 2016 and I asked you if I could explore our bond? You were with Peter at the time, working on some projects.”
Tony frowned. “I vaguely remember it… Why?”

“At the centre of your soul I found a ball of rippling energy. My own body was responding to it, even though we were miles apart at the time. I think if I’d been able to see my own body, it would have been glowing. The ball of energy was bound together, tied together and I couldn’t reach it. An invisible barrier was protecting it. I’m wondering if the chains are still there.”

Tony turned to face her. “Surely they wouldn’t be? I’ve got all the Stones… And I am displaying evidence my powers are loose…”

“But not widely, nor controllable,” she pointed out cautiously. “You’re not like Carol or Wanda who can use theirs freely. Will you let me look again?”

He wasn’t sure. He knew Nat and he had a bond, but he’d just had his mind invaded by Thanos. The thought of someone else entering his brain, even if he trusted them, wasn’t something he was that keen on. He swallowed. But if he wanted to be able to control his powers, perhaps Natasha was on to something? He shifted his body towards her, crossing his legs on the bed and placing his hands in his lap. “Ok.”

Natasha nodded, understanding the level of trust Tony was giving her. “I won’t hurt you.”

“If you do, I think we both know what will happen,” he replied, his fingers twitching.

“Please try not to fling me into a wall.” Natasha reached out and placed her right hand in the centre of Tony’s chest.

He watched as she closed her eyes, her breathing slowed and then her body began to glow orange. She was in his soul. It didn’t feel like hardly any minutes had passed before –

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Natasha opened her eyes. She’d followed their bond directly into the centre of Tony’s soul. She could see the ball of energy in front of her. It was glistening six different colours: blue, purple, red, yellow, green and orange. It was shining brightly and she stepped forward.

The ball of energy still seemed bound together, crackling gently, still imprisoned and unable to fully unleash, however there were small sparks seeping through. It was these small sparks which Tony had to be unleashing unexpectedly.

“Why are you still bound?” she wondered aloud. “How can we free this power?”

Before when she’d tried touch it during her previous visit to Tony’s soul, she had been unable to move past the barrier and had been flung back out his soul.

“I wonder…”

Reaching out, Natasha pressed her hand to the invisible barrier and moved forward. She wasn’t clung back, instead she moved seamlessly through the barrier and into the centre of the ball of energy.

She was now fully inside the powers bound to Tony, but what was keeping them tied like this. She hadn’t been able to reach this far before. “There has to be something I need to do… I wouldn’t have got this far if I hadn’t needed to do anything here…”

Casting her gaze about, Natasha saw the flickering energies of the six different Infinity Stones
cascading through the air. “They’re loose in here… but not outside the ball…” She frowned and then noticed her fingers were slightly glowing orange, as if she was responding to the infinite energies around her.

Kneeling down, Natasha pressed her hands to the floor. She didn’t know why she felt the need to do this, yet something was urging her to do just this.

Six small pillars of orange energy rose from the floor and they latched on to one colour each that had been harmlessly floating around inside the ball.

Rising from her spot on the floor, Natasha approached each strand of energy. “Maybe they need to link together…” Oddly, those words felt right. Perhaps she was being moved towards this without really realising it?

Six strands of energy, all representing the Infinity Stones were resting now on the pillars of orange energy. Her hands were still glowing. What else did she need to do? Stepping up to the first pillar which had latched onto a red strand of energy, Natasha reached out and touched the end of it. Her body vibrated, almost like it was shocking her, before calming down.

Confused, and almost unsure of what she was supposed to do, Natasha walked to the next pillar, only noticing when she reached it that there was now a line of energy extending from the small strand of red she had touched just moments before.

“Am I connecting them together?”

There was only one way to find out.

She stood in front of a purple strand and reached out and touched the tip of it. The same sensations as before rocked through her, and the red and purple strands connected, interweaving with one another. There was a small hum echoing in her ears. Overjoyed by her success, she moved between each pillar representing each Infinity Stone, before stepping back and admiring her work.

All six pillars were now joined together by the weaves of strands emanating from each small aspect of the Stones. Smiling, Natasha moved back, watching as the pillars glowed together in the assorted colours of the Stones before there was a flash of light which blinded her.

When she opened her eyes, she was back in her body, looking at Tony. Surprise flashed across her features.

And his whole body was glowing in front of her.

“What did you do?” he managed to ask, his voice croaky. He held up his glowing hands, admiring the colours running over his skin.

Natasha swallowed. “I think… I may have released your powers…”

“How?” he asked, a hint of a smile on his face.

“They were still trapped inside you… But I could go inside the energy ball this time… I couldn’t before and there were strands all over it, floating around, unconnected. My own powers seemed to activate whilst I was in there… I kinda… formed pillars and then linked all six together?” She tipped her head to the side. “That is probably the best way to describe what happened.”
He held up his hand, wriggling his fingers. “So… you think you’ve just given me the ability to switch them on and off?”

“I hope I did… Not sure Pepper would appreciate a glowing husband all the time,” Natasha laughed.

“She’d grow to love it!” grinned Tony, but his face sobered a bit. Uncrossing his legs, he moved off the bed to stand in the centre of the room. “But can I control them now?” He cast a glance all over himself. “I really am glowing!”

Natasha leaned back against the wall. “If you’re going to experiment, try not to hit me.”

“Now why would I do that?” Tony grinned. “Hmm, what shall I try? I already made a hole in the wall… It wouldn’t harm the structural bases of the room if I made another one…” Raising his hand up like he did when he used the repulsor on the Iron Man suit, Tony felt a rush of power and a beam of energy erupted from his hand and hit the wall, making the hole even bigger than before. “Ok… that was relatively easy. I just wanted to shoot something and it worked…”

Natasha’s face brightened into a smile. “That’s great news!”

“Maybe…” Tony frowned. He took a deep breath and the glow around his body ceased. “Huh. It’s that easy?”

“Breathing switched it off?” she asked.

Tony shook his head. “No… Well… sort of. It’s weird… I can sense my power whereas before I couldn’t.” He could feel a strange sensation in the centre of his chest, a slight warmth which he had not experienced before, even when he’d briefly used his powers. “Odd.”

“So…?” Natasha wanted to know more.

Tony closed his eyes, breathing slowly, reaching out mentally to the warmth in his chest and then suddenly he was glowing again. “Woah…” Then, with his eyes now open, he reached for the little nub he could feel and the glow faded. “Ok… that really is simple.” He placed a hand upon his chest. “I feel a little nub here, close to my heart. I think it has to be soul related, but I can feel it. I reached for it… I do not even have to really concentrate doing it…” He began glowing again. “I can do it!” He was grinning now, happy and pleased he’d finally found out what had been stopping him from fully realising his powers. Tony reached for the nub again and stopped himself from glowing. “Seems so easy now that I know how…”

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “Do you think you need to train to use them or will it come naturally like it did for Carol?”

Scratching the back of his head, Tony winced. “I hope naturally but I’m not silly enough to assume it will be that easy. Just because I can easily switch them on and off now doesn’t make it simple to use them all. I suspect I have a range of abilities I still need to discover.” He grinned then. “Don’t say anything to Wanda. I want to surprise her tomorrow…”

She chuckled. “You are so mean, Stark.”

Tony’s eyes twinkled in amusement.
“He’s late,” groused Wanda, tapping her fingers over her folded arms, her eyes focused firmly on the clock.

“It’s Tony?” reasoned Natasha. She was sitting on a makeshift running wall, kicking her legs out and in, waiting for the moment Tony intended to arrive. He was thirty minutes late. She’d known he was going to be – he’d told her he planned to attempt to portal down to the training room. She had attempted to advise him against doing something so reckless.

Naturally, Tony being Tony Stark, didn’t listen.

She hoped, if he had tried to portal down, he hadn’t got stuck somewhere and they’d never find him. Easily, she could try to trace him with their bond, yet she was strangely enjoying the anticipation Tony’s sudden appearance would bring, when he eventually decided to join them.

“If he’s not here in five minutes I’m going up to that room of his and dragging him out! Naked or not!” stormed Wanda, red lancets of energy dancing around her form.

“He’ll be here,” reassured Natasha.

“He should have been here half-an-hour ago!” Wanda began pacing. “I know I shouldn’t get frustrated with him but he’s pushing his luck like this! All I’m trying to do is to help him try to learn these powers. He needs them. If he’s not going to apply himself to the teaching process then I may as – ARGH!”

Tony had appeared right in front of Wanda, smugly grinning at her.

“What the-!” Wanda slapped him. “-hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Tony rubbed his sore cheek.

Natasha bit her cheek to stop herself from laughing, though Tony rightly deserved to be slapped after intentionally turning up late just so he could attempt to portal into the training area.

“And how did you do that?” shouted Wanda angrily.

Tony shrunk back, a little frightened by Wanda’s angry stance.

“Sorry. I may have found out why I couldn’t use my powers yesterday… Nat and I discovered it last night.”

Wanda turned on Nat. “You knew about this?”

Great, now Wanda would be mad at her for playing along with Tony’s idea. “I did… He wanted to surprise you.”

Wanda sighed, her shoulder slumping. “Ok. Start from the beginning. Yesterday you couldn’t do anything and now you can just portal in here just like that?” She clicked her fingers.

Natasha listened quietly as Tony explained to Wanda what had occurred the previous night and how he could now use his powers whenever he wanted.

“It’s like a television. I can switch them on and off whenever I want to. All I need to do is figure out what I can do and to use each power safely,” said Tony. “Nat and I were given this bond for a reason. I think she’s meant to help me control them… Think about, I have the power of the universe within me… Perhaps she’s meant to keep me safe, anchor me and stop me from using too
much power… If I do, she has the ability to break the links, thereby shutting my powers down. I’ve barely slept, been thinking about this most of the night.”

Wanda frowned. “I guess it makes sense…”

Natasha had considered the same thing. Tony did have a lot of power. She recalled her conversation with Soul on Vormir. “He has incredible power at his disposal. He needs someone to ground him when it unleashes. That person is you. He needs you, Natasha Romanoff.”

Tony’s theory was correct. She was needed to keep him grounded, to keep him human. Tony didn’t know it yet but he wasn’t fully human… But she did. Focusing her attention on Tony and Wanda, she leaned back to watch as Tony activated his powers again.

Tony rubbed his hands together. “Now, shall we find out what I can do?”

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It turned out to be an interesting session. Since Natasha had linked Tony’s powers together, he was now able to control them, bring them to the fore with ease and shut them down whenever he wanted to. He could portal all over the place and they wondered if he’d be able to take them to another planet without the need of space travel. Tony assumed he could since he’d brought himself home.

But that wasn’t an experiment they really wanted to try, not when Tony was uncovering his powers and experiencing what he could do.

They learned he had abilities linked to each Infinity Stone.

Space enabled him to portal to wherever he liked.

Power enabled him to attack anyone with energy beams, and the strength of them were capable of knocking Wanda unconscious. Surprisingly he couldn’t kill with them, though he wondered if that was because he didn’t want to kill Wanda or Nat or Steve, who had joined them in the training room to help Tony test his powers. He supposed knocking people unconscious would be useful. The question was whether they worked on Thanos. Somehow, Tony doubted it would be that easy. If the Titan was worthy of wielding them, the chances of them being lethal to him was unlikely. Still, at least these powers made him more of a challenge against the Titan.

Time, Tony found, he could stop it whenever he wanted. He could even accelerate it. He wondered if he combined his powers for Space and Time if he’d be able to travel back and forwards in time. It was an idea that had merit but one he wouldn’t experiment on.

Not yet at least.

Defeating Thanos was his first priority.

Mind enabled him to be able to read minds, mainly from touching their forehead. He tested this technique on Nat, Wanda and Steve, and then went to the kitchen where he found Sam and Bucky quietly discussing what to have for lunch. Tony had intervened and had declared he knew exactly what each wanted for lunch, but neither could be bothered to cook what they desired. With their permission, Tony had asked if he could try something out, and after placing a hand on their respective foreheads, he’d been able to correctly guess what they wanted to eat.

He’d then promptly ordered FRIDAY to order in an Indian Curry for Sam and a Pizza for Bucky.
Reality gave Tony interesting powers. He could alter reality around him, confuse his attackers into believing something was real when it wasn’t. He transformed the Training Ground into a jungle, only to amuse himself when Steve walked right into a wall, nearly breaking his nose in the process. He couldn’t change the size of the rooms, but he could alter what others perceived it to be. It would be an interesting tactic to use against anyone who dared attack him. Because Tony was the one altering the surroundings, he still saw the room as to what it was, not what it had become, though he had a second vision that he was able to switch between if he wished to.

Finally, Soul. This was the most difficult Stone to manifest powers from. Seemingly, it turned out that he wasn’t able to directly harness its powers as it mostly resided within Nat. However, when Nat suggested they hold hands, he was able to use her own powers himself, channelling them through himself, and he was able to read people’s souls, and determine what they were about to do. He could sense whether they had good or bad intentions. Though it was difficult to sense bad intentions from his friends, the concept was there, that no one could really attack or harm Tony anymore because of the range of abilities he had to protect himself.

Using the abilities still needed some fine-tuning and he vowed to work with Wanda and a rotating group of his friends throughout the rest of the week to test out his new abilities. Quite easily, once he knew what he was doing, he was able to fully control them with no problem.

Happy and thrilled he had finally figured out how to use them, that night Tony slept well.

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**Thursday 7th June 2018**

They were called in the early hours of the morning to the arrival of the *Benatar*, which had arrived unannounced just twenty minutes before. Bleary eyed and hurriedly dressed, Tony made it to the Conference room just as the Guardians of the Galaxy were settling into chairs around the table.

Tony was not surprised to see Thor with them, missing one eye and looking absolutely devastated. The God of Thunder did perk up slightly when he saw Tony but soon returned to his sombre mood.

Once all the Avengers were seated around the Conference table, Thor finally spoke. “Thanos is coming to Earth. He’s after the –”

“Thor… they know,” interrupted Bruce quietly. “I told them.”

Thor nodded. His hair had been cut and he looked more kingly than he had ever done so before. “He’s still coming here.”

“For me,” said Tony. Thor still did not know their side of the story.

“Why would he come for you?” spluttered Thor, surprised at Tony’s gall to suggest such a thing.

Tony smirked. “Because I’m incredibly important and Thanos’ greatest fear?” He was probably overstating his self-importance, but he knew Thanos did fear him.

“For once, Tony’s ego is right,” continued Steve, glancing between Tony and Thor. “Even Clint was surprised.”

Clint had arrived at the Compound a week ago and he and Natasha had shared a little time together, catching and the archer had been informed of everything that had occurred lately, ensuring he was up to speed on what the Avengers had been doing lately in his absence.
Clint had promised to be there for them when the Avengers called. If Thanos was such a big threat, he wanted to be there to defend his home and his family. But since they didn’t have a time frame as to when Thanos may return, Clint didn’t want to stay behind when he could be with his family.

Thor glanced around the room. “Quill said he’d had some adventures with all of you…”

“I didn’t say what,” defended Quill. “Just that we’d met and –”

“Gone on space-faring adventures?” guessed Tony.

“Yeah? Got a problem with that?” Quill replied.

Gamora rolled her eyes. “You do like to quarrel with others, don’t you?” she mused.

“I’m not quarrelling! I’m making conversation,” stated Quill.

Tony shook his head. He wasn’t surprised. Quill did have a record for being trouble to others, or getting others in trouble. “It doesn’t matter anyway. Thor, you’ve missed a lot, and its time you were filled in.” Glancing around the room, Tony sent an apologetic look to the others. “I know we’re going over old ground… but it needs to happen.”

With Thor now filled in, it was time to turn their attention to their next steps.

“We were expecting you sooner,” said Natasha. In the old timeline, the Battle of Wakanda had already happened. For now, no attack on Earth had occurred. They were in new territory, with the threat of Thanos still out there.

“We had a detour,” admitted Thor. “I needed a Thanos-killing weapon.” He glanced at Tony. “Might not have needed it if I’d known Stark was collecting the Stones. Still surprised he’s able to wield them.”

“We all are,” said Bruce. “The future they came from, they said Thanos won. We have to prevent it, Thor.”

Natasha walked around the room, easing the aches in her shoulders. “We have a good chance of ensuring this plays out the way we’d like it to. But Thanos is still out there and he’ll be coming here. Not for Vision or for Doctor Strange, but for Tony. Tony may be powerful now, but he still needs to be protected.”

Tony rolled his eyes, and his body began to glow. He hadn’t really revealed his powers to the others yet though they all knew he had them. He sat there, the variety of colours echoing around him. “I think Thanos has a lot to worry about when he faces me. He’ll be preparing to face me before he comes to Earth. If he can find a way to take me out in advance, he will.”

Natasha was remembering the device she had been shown during her talk with Soul. The device Tony had been attached to, and where Thanos had been wielding the Stones. Was that a potential future which was still to come? “Thor… the Stones melded with Tony, is there a way their energies could be extracted from him?”

“If they can be given, they can be removed…” answered Thor. “Stark should not be able to wield those Stones without significant changes made to his body.”

Natasha winced. If anyone was likely to work out the full truth, it would be Thor, especially since
he recognised Tony shouldn’t be able to hold the power of the universe in a frail human body. She’d carried out her own scans of Tony discreetly, asking FRIDAY to send her the results of a full body scan she’d undertaken of Tony. It had revealed him to be human.

*I wonder if he’d register as human when he is using his powers. Something in him was changed by the Stones. But if he’s still registering as human…*

“Could finding a device to harness Tony’s powers be Thanos’ goal?” asked Natasha.

“It’s possible but no one would help Thanos create such a weapon,” continued Thor. “I do not believe we need to worry about Thanos obtaining a weapon which could be used against us.”

“That’s a relief,” said Tony. “I’d rather not be his prisoner again. It hurt too much last time.”

“I think in your case, Tony, he’d go straight for the kill,” nodded Steve. “If you are a threat to him, his priority would be to wipe you out.”

“Yet, killing Tony may prevent him from taking the Stones…” interjected Gamora. “No, my father may not go straight for the kill, not until he would know for sure he cannot take them some other way first.”

“Then what do we do?” Wanda leaned forward in her chair. “We have to plan for the eventuality Thanos will come. If he does, it will be soon.”

“I’ve got the defences sorted,” said Tony. “The Accords Committee and I have been working on this for a long while. If Thanos comes here, the planet is protected. He’ll still be able to make his way onto the planet, but he’ll have a hard time in overrunning places. Wakanda has been very helpful in enabling us to set this up. Most major cities around the globe have energy barriers now. Thanos’ forces could get through them but not too many at once. I’ve been working with Wakanda for a few years now.”

“So we wait?” asked Sam.

Tony nodded. “We wait.”

Because it was the only thing they could do unless they took the fight to Thanos, and Tony had learned the hard way doing so had not been his smartest move. It had doomed him and Nat to eventual death after all.

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That night Pepper joined Tony in bed, curling up beside him. With Thanos’ likely now on his way to Earth with his army, Pepper had taken a leave of absence from Stark Industries. She was determined to see this through and fight beside Tony, no matter how much he tried to deter her from that path.

She was stubborn and refused to accept waiting around. Her argument that Thanos would be after her because of her association with Tony was a good one, but he worried having Pepper out on the battle-field would make her a bigger target. She assumed Thanos wouldn’t believe Tony would put her in danger and would keep her hidden, potentially meaning he’d split some of his forces from his main army to go in search of her.

Because if anything would break Tony Stark, it would be seeing the woman he loved die.

It was a good theory but Tony knew he couldn’t stop Pepper doing what she wanted to. She’d been
training in the suit he’d prepared for her and she had picked it up quickly. She’d had more practice in this suit than the one she had worn when he had died.

“Can’t sleep?” she asked, wrapping her arms around him.

“No. Just…thinking…” he said truthfully.

“About what?” she queried.

Tony sighed. “The future and what is heading our way.”

Pepper rested her head on Tony’s shoulder, snuggling under the covers. “We’ll be alright, Tony, you’ll see. Everything will work out just the way it’s supposed to.”

As Pepper fell asleep beside him, Tony couldn’t help his mind running over Pepper’s choice of words. Everything will work out just the way it’s supposed to.

Those were the exact words he had used in the message he had left for Pepper and Morgan before departing for the Time Heist. It chilled him to the bone hearing those words from Pepper.

And he couldn’t help but worry that it was an ominous hint of what was to come.

That everything would work out the way it was supposed to, but not necessarily the way Tony wanted it to.

And it terrified him.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Originally I was going to show Wanda and Tony going through the steps of learning his powers but that was the roadblock which was halting progress of this chapter. I made the decision to change it, and what is now in this chapter is how Tony learned.

Thor is back and the Guardians! From here on out there is going to be a lot of stuff happening as we build up towards the final chapters! :D

I hope to post next weekend... Chapter Title will be 'The Strategy'...

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Strategy

Chapter Summary

Things take an unexpected turn...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Another chapter down... 9 chapters to go... Exciting times. Cannot believe we're heading for the end of this fic now...

Good news is that I have two weeks off from work starting from this Friday and I'm not really intending on doing much but I'm going to try my best to make a lot of progress on this fic so from now onwards the updates will remain weekly. I'm really excited about the following chapters!

Thank you, everyone, who has commented so far!

Please, do, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Strategy

Wednesday 8th August 2018

“Tony?”

Tony wiped his face with the towel, slowing his jog on the treadmill before it finally stopped. “What do you want, Steve?”

It had been two months since Thor and the Guardians had arrived on Earth. Thanos had not yet attacked which surprised Tony and Natasha. They had contemplated trying to seek the Titan out but they figured the moment they left Earth, Thanos would strike, and they couldn’t risk leaving the planet undefended.

The world was on heightened alert, though the general public was unaware of how prepared Earth was for an alien incursion, nor were they aware of the incoming threat that threatened their entire civilisation. Those that needed to know were kept in the fold. The Guardians had agreed to stay and had been bunking out at the Avenger’s Facility, taking the occasional excursion to space.

“I just wanted to talk…”

“About what?” Tony stepped off the treadmill, throwing the towel over his shoulder.
Steve bit his lower lip. “Well… this may seem odd… Wasn’t Morgan born in 2019?”

“She was…” Tony replied slowly. He wondered where Steve was going with this.

“Isn’t it getting close to the time when she would need to… erm…” Steve’s face went red. “Sorry, this isn’t a subject I would usually partake in…”

Tony chuckled. He was sure Roger’s didn’t mean to discuss his and Pepper’s sex life but Steve was one of the only people who knew Morgan had existed and had an invested interest in ensuring she was born. “I am well aware of when she needs to be… created.” He peered curiously at Steve. “I suspect there is more to this conversation than you’re hinting at though.” He was quietly bemused.

Steve shrugged, trying to avoid Tony’s assertions. “Remember when you told me about Morgan?”

“Yeah…” He was intrigued by where Steve was going with this.

“When I met Peggy… I had hoped after the war had ended, we could be together… Then I slept for seventy years. I see you with Pepper and the future you hope you can still have… When you told me about Morgan, your eyes…I saw how much you cared for them, how much you love them and would do anything for them. You already gave your life for the universe… I’d do anything for you to get what you want. You deserve it after everything you’ve been through.” Steve glanced away.

“Really?” Tony wasn’t sure. He’d made plenty of mistakes in the past. “I believe I’m not worthy. I’ve spent the last part of my life trying to make up for all the silly mistakes I’ve done, trying to be the person I was supposed to be… I’m not sure I can make up for decades worth of wrongs… I may have been brought back… but am I worth the trouble I’ve caused to let me have the life I want to have?” He shook his head. It was a hard idea to believe. “Steve… I have to face Thanos. I may die doing it, in fact, there is a very high chance I will do so. No one else can make the sacrifice I will probably have to make. I want to be a father to Morgan, I want to see her grow up… but…” He lowered his head. “I do not believe it will happen… We’re too close to the date of her conception for me to believe she is meant to be…”

“Tony,” said Steve earnestly, “I want to promise you one thing and I intend to keep it, no matter what.”

“Steve…” Tony held up his hands to stop him, afraid of what Steve was going to promise. He didn’t want him to make promises he couldn’t keep.

“No, Tony, I’m doing this.” Steve was stubborn, if not practical. Once he got an idea into his head, he had to do it. “I am promising you, no matter what happens, you will get to be with Pepper, and Morgan will exist.” He shook Tony’s shoulder gently. “Besides, the only way I’ll be able to ever be with Peggy now is if I join her in death. You may not be a man of God, Tony, but I was raised as one… and though I’ve had my eyes opened, and I see how large the universe is, a part of me still hopes we are united with our loved ones when we die. It won’t be just Peggy I see, it will be my mum and my dad too.”

Tony wasn’t sure what to say. He recognised Steve would try to tell him otherwise if he attempted to talk Steve out of his promise. No, Steve may have made a promise, but he wouldn’t accept it, as long as he had some control over it.

It wasn’t just the world that needed Captain America. The friends and the family he had made here had to count for something. He didn’t dispute Steve’s words, only accepted them… for now.
It was late afternoon when Tony received a message from Natasha, asking him to join them in the Conference Room. Making his way there, holding Pepper’s hand, they arrived to find Carol Danvers standing against the wall, her arms folded across her chest, and grimacing.

Tony brightened when he saw her but Carol’s expression said it all. She was not here for a social visit. Something had happened…

Reluctantly he released Pepper’s hand, dread settling into the pit of his heart. Thanos had been too quiet for the last two months. They’d let him go and now Tony figured he was about to learn what the mad Titan had been doing all this time. Steve, Bruce, Thor, and Wanda were already waiting for him.

“I get the feeling this is going to be bad…” Tony noted, realising it was probably the most obvious thing he could say.

“You could say that,” Carol shrugged. “You have powers now, right?” She was staring at Tony.

He figured the others had already informed her. “Yeah,” he admitted. “Absorbed all the Stones, now I have powers. Why?”

“Thanos implied as much,” stated Carol darkly.

Tony swallowed. He wasn’t liking where this conversation was going. “And?” He probed further.

“I was ambushed. And, believe me, it is very difficult to ambush me,” said Carol. “He has something, a device, on his person, situated on his wrist. A device which disabled me.”

The bad feeling became worse. *Shit.*

“What is it?” whispered Pepper, her face chalk white.

“It drained me of my powers. He could have easily killed me and I would have been helpless against him. But he didn’t. He chose to let me go. I know he wanted me to come here but I couldn’t not warn you. He said to me ‘if I can negate the effects of your powers with this device, then I can harness the Stones from Stark’.” Carol leaned forward. “I have reason to believe he has a larger device installed in his ship which could harness your powers. The device he had on him is one he can use to block or drain me of my powers. I’m ineffectual against him if he has the device on him.”

“Which would explain why he let you live,” said Steve, “because he has a defence against you.”

“That means this device would affect me too?” asked Wanda.

Carol nodded. “If you got your powers from the Stones, yes.”

“She did,” confirmed Tony. He wanted to scream. He’d discovered his powers but would not be unable to use them against Thanos. “I could have ended this ages ago if I’d just gone to find him myself…”

“Tony…” began Steve, “you cannot blame yourself. You weren’t ready. We weren’t ready. Now we are. We know how to prepare ourselves. He may be able to take away your powers but he won’t take away Iron Man.”
Steve’s words did make him feel slightly better. He still had the suit. Even if Thanos did block his powers, he’d still be able to deal damage.

“The question I have,” began Natasha, “is where did he get this device from? Who built it for him?”

“I don’t know,” answered Carol, “even my own scans couldn’t identify the material used. It’s tough and very ancient… Not many in the universe would be able to craft such a device.”

“Oh no…” Thor muttered, shaking his head. “We have to get to Nidavellir. It’s where I got my hammer from. Only Eitri would be able to build such a device. Last time Thanos was there he killed all the dwarves, save from Eitri… If he returned there…”

“He might not have a reason to leave him alive this time…” swallowed Bruce, shock adorning his features.

“How quickly can we get there?” asked Steve, already activating his comm-unit to summon the Guardians and the other Avengers.

“Depending on the location, I could get there in a few hours or days,” said Carol.

“A regular ship would take weeks,” said Thor, “even with its location within the Nine Realms. I could take us there in an instant…” He held up his hammer. “I’d be quicker.”

“No,” Tony shook his head. “There is another way.”

“Tony…” Natasha clearly knew what he was thinking.

“We need to know if I can, Nat. I can portal all around the Earth, to any place I want to be or where I need to be. We’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this. If I can portal myself to Nidavellir, without ever having been there, just by thinking of it, then we know how far my portal abilities can stretch. We assume I could return to Earth before because I live here. This is the perfect time to test my theory. How far do my powers truly reach?”

Natasha sighed. She raised her hand. “I vote for Tony over Thor.”

He smiled gratefully at her. Her support was what he needed right now.

“If you’re doing this, I’m coming to,” said Pepper, grabbing his hand.

“What-? No!” Tony turned to face her. “You have to stay here where it is safe.”

“Chances are Thanos is on his way here already,” stated Pepper haughtily. “If he comes here and you are not on Earth, the first thing he will do is come and get me. But he won’t because I’d be with you and you can protect me easier if you know where I am. Plus, I have my own suit. I’m not as defenceless as you want me to be, Tony. I said I’d stay by your side. That isn’t changing.”

“How could I be so lucky to have you?” he whispered.

“Someone has to stay here if Thanos comes in the meantime,” interrupted Steve.

“You should stay Steve,” suggested Natasha. “Carol, Thor, Tony, Pepper and I should go to Nidavellir. We shouldn’t be too long.”

“I think Carol should stay here,” advised Bruce. “We might need her. I’m not sure if the Hulk is even going to fight in this battle. We’re having issues at the moment…” In the two months since
Bruce had been on Earth, he had not been able to summon the Hulk. And it was frustrating that one of their biggest hitters was refusing to help. “I’m working on a solution… but…”

“You don’t know if it will be ready in time,” answered Steve.

“I’d stay,” said Carol, “but I know what Thanos is using. These guys do not. I can help narrow the search down at Nidavellir, especially if something has happened to this Eitri. If he’s not alive, I’m the only one who can identify anything to do with this device Thanos has had created.”

“She has a point,” backed up Tony. “But we’re wasting time standing here and debating this.”

Steve nodded and back away. “If Thanos is nearly here, Tony, we’ll have everyone ready by the time you return.”

Tony inclined his head. “I’ll hold you to that, Rogers.” He held out his hands. “I’ve never done this before and if it doesn’t work, we have Thor as a backup.”

“Wait, don’t you and Pepper need your suits?” asked Natasha. “What if Thanos is waiting for us there?”

“Another good point raised,” muted Tony, “but one I had already thought of.” He reached into his pocket and held out two miniaturised Arc Reactors. “One for Pepper, and one for me. I rarely go anywhere without these.” He placed the Arc Reactor on his chest, the metallic behind attaching to his clothes, and Pepper did the same. “If we needed these, we’re ready.”

Pepper smiled gratefully at him.

“Good luck.” Steve stepped back.

“Pepper, Thor take my hand.” Pepper stood by his right side and Thor on his left. Then Natasha held Thor’s hand and Carol held Pepper’s.

Tony closed his eyes.

*Take me to Nidavellir…* he willed silently.

He felt his chest warming and a pull at his navel and he clutched tightly at Thor and Pepper’s hands before a nasty tang reached his nose, a smell so nauseating he nearly gagged.

When he opened his eyes, he knew he wasn’t on Earth anymore.

He was on Nidavellir.

But his eyes found the smelling and rotting body of what, he could only presume, was Eitri, just meters from where he had brought them.

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Avengers Compound

The alert came through within ten minutes of Tony leaving Earth.

Multiple ships were pushing through the atmosphere, heading down towards the Earth. It was without question that Thanos had finally decided to attack.

“He must have been waiting for Tony to leave…” Steve had already called for the Avengers to
assemble, alerted Wakanda and called the Accords committee before the ships had even been detected. Even FRIDAY’s satellites hadn’t picked up on the ships. The only reason he could think of was that they must have been cloaked. “He was watching us all this time…”

Steve rushed towards the hanger. They had to face this threat now and hope they could hold them off before Tony returned.

“The ships have changed course.” FRIDAY indicated.

Steve continued running towards the Jet. “Where are they going?”

“Calculating new trajectory... Queens... Drop ships are heading to Queens.”

The location surprised Steve. “Queens? Why Queens? What’s so important for them-” And it hit him. He knew what they were after. If they couldn’t get Pepper to get to Tony they’d… “The kid…”

Steve only ran faster.

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**Nidavellir**

“He killed him…” Thor knelt down beside Eitri’s body, gently touching the cold body. “He’s been dead for a while…” His eyes roamed his body. “He gave him his hands back… Then killed him…”

Tony wiggled his nose. A part of him had expected this. “What do we do now?”

“We look,” said Carol, already moving around the chamber they’d arrived in. “There has to be some clue left behind that we can use.”

Pepper was on the other side of the Chamber, fully suited up now, same as Tony was. It felt dangerous to be here, though whether that was because they’d found Eitri, or because they felt Thanos was lurking somewhere…

“Most of the equipment is destroyed,” observed Natasha. “He’s been really thorough... If there are any clues here, they’ll be long gone. Thanos would have made sure of it.”

Tony moved around to the other side of the chamber, ruffling through the rubble. “How did Eitri make his designs?”

Thor moved away from his friend’s body. “Usually hand-drawn. The dwarves were... rather... despite being advanced, they never forgot the old ways. Then they created a mould of what they wanted to make before starting the full forging process. Depending on what it was they wanted creating, sometimes it could take minutes, hours, days or weeks.”

“Likely any designs are burnt then…” noted Tony. He was thinking this was a useless trip. Still, he did know he could go anywhere in the universe just by thinking about it. He started to shift through the rubble. “If we can find anything, any clue...”

“We can’t stay too long,” said Natasha.

“I know. We need to at least do a base check, just in case. An hour at most,” said Tony. “If we find nothing then we leave and work on the assumption Thanos has in his possession a device he can
use to drain my powers and transfer them to himself because that is what he wants. Stopping Carol, Wanda and I becoming a threat to him is the other part of his plan.”

“Let us not waste this hour then,” said Pepper.

- - - - -

Exactly fifty-three minutes later, with just seven minutes to go before Tony intended to call it a day, he heard Pepper excitedly yelling for them to converge on her. Thor was halfway around the station and Carol had to fly out to bring him in since he hadn’t switched on his com-unit.

Tony boosted over to her, choosing not to portal over to her. There was no point in using his powers for such a small jump. He landed beside her. “What have you found?”

She held up a box-shaped piece of clay. “A mould of something. But look,” she pointed at the centre of the box-shaped piece. “There is room for one person to hang. Can you see the little chains? And the head piece?”

“Yeah…” Tony took the piece from her hand. A part of him wanted to throw it as far away from him as possible.

“And look,” she pointed to six small holes embedded at the top of the box. “Room for six Infinity Stones.”

Tony swallowed. “This is what he’s got on his ship.” Realisation dawned on him.

Pepper gripped him by the arms. “Tony… whatever happens, you cannot face him, not while he has this wrist thing that can block your powers. If this is what you think it is, this is what he intends to do to you once you’re disabled to transport.”

“Pep… I have no choice. I have to face him. I’ve been on this path for years. I cannot change the endgame now.”

She bowed her head. “No… I suppose not… I wish you could though.”

Before he could further attempt to reassure her, though he knew how helpless it would be, Carol arrived with Thor and Natasha.

“What have you found?” asked Natasha.

Tony held up the designed mould. “Something Thanos could have had forged before he killed Eitri.” He handed it to Carol. “Is it what I think it could be?”

Carol inspected the mould, turning it over in her fingers; a look of pure concentration on her face. “You may be right. If so… We’re in trouble.”

Tony exchanged glances with Natasha. He couldn’t help but notice her face was white and her lips were very slightly trembling.

“We have to get back to Earth,” Natasha managed. “We’re running out of time.”

Tony couldn’t agree more.

Pocketing the mould in a small compartment Tony formed in his suit, he took Pepper’s and Nat’s hands, whilst Thor and Carol took Pepper and Nat’s respectively before he closed his eyes, thought of Earth and sent them spiralling back to the Avenger’s Compound.
When they arrived home, it was to a disaster.

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**New York City – the outskirts**

“What happened?” Tony swallowed, casting his eyes around him as he took in the view of the smoking outline of New York City. They hadn’t been gone long... just over an hour and they had returned to find Thanos had invaded the planet and attacked New York City...

Steve sighed, his shoulder slumping. “We were too slow. It came as a surprise. We reached New York as quickly as we could... But we were too late to stop him taking what he wanted.”

Those words caught Tony’s attention and a feeling of dread filled his stomach. “What do you mean? What did he take?”

“Not what,” clarified Steve, “rather … ‘them’.”

He had a feeling he knew what Steve was going to say next. He didn’t want to hear it. “Don’t –”

“Tony, I have to... It’s important,” said Steve quietly.

“Who did he take?” Tony was afraid of the answer. It wasn’t Pepper as she’d been with him. But the uncanny feeling was back. Thanos had seen inside his head, had seen who Tony loved and cared for most of all. With Morgan not existing yet and Pepper with Tony in space, there were only two other possible options: Rhodey and Happy or...

“He took the kid and his Aunt,” confirmed Steve quietly. “I’m sorry-”

“Damn it!” Tony whirled away from Steve, anger rippling through him, his body now glowing as his anger increased. “Why couldn’t you have been faster?”

Steve looked defeated. “We tried our best, Tony. Thanos struck too quickly and too fast for us to efficiently react before it was too late. He was in and out with the kid and his Aunt before we had all left the Compound. He knew exactly where he needed to go.”

Tony cursed, clenching his fists together.

He raised his head.

Above them, in orbit around the Earth, was Thanos’ ship. He couldn’t see the ship from where he was but he knew the Titan was waiting. Peter was up there with this Aunt. He knew the kid well enough that he wouldn’t try anything if it meant putting his Aunt in danger.

But Thanos had acted smart, waiting for the moment when Tony had to leave Earth to strike and take a bargaining chip. Who knew how long Thanos had been waiting for to make his move?

Tony gritted his teeth.

Steve laid a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “We’ll get them back, Tony.”

“I know we will.” Tony whirled. “Thanos is about to find out messing with me is a very bad idea.”

Tony clenched his fists together.

“Assemble the Avengers. This ends today.”
Several things in this chapter... Thanos has been quiet for the last few months, making sure he is ready for Tony... and Tony and the Avengers have been preparing Earth for Thanos' inevitable attack. They just didn't expect it to go this way.

Thanos promised Eitri, the dwarf his hands back if he crafted him a machine for harnessing the infinity Stones power from a human... and then promptly killed him so he wouldn't be able to help the Avengers. Thanos figured they'd probably go there which is why he was waiting to attack Earth. He has been ever watchful...

Thanos has two devices in his possession. One, a smaller version on his wrist, which has the capability of blocking Carol's powers and is likely to affect Tony too since Carol's powers come from an Infinity Stone, as does Wanda's. And the second is the large machine he intends for Tony.

The next chapter will be posted next weekend. I'm seeing family next Sunday so if I do update it will be very late at night. If it is finished before Sunday, I will post it on Saturday :)

The next chapter title is: The Ambush

Until next time,

the-writer1988

Until next time,
Chapter Thirty: The Ambush

Chapter Summary

The Avengers attack Thanos...

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

My apologies for the lack of update. This chapter was really hard to write and I've had a lot to deal with in my personal life which is still ongoing.

As I'm sure most of you are affected by this, the Coronavirus crisis is just engulfing the world at the moment. I'm in the UK and I am classed as a front-line worker in the health service here. I am currently on two-weeks holiday and I'm meant to be back at work on Monday. However I am also at extreme high risk of serious illness from Covid-19 if I contract it as I have had a kidney transplant and on immune suppression drugs and the UK government is telling anyone with specific health conditions to stay at home for 12 weeks. I fall under that category, however my place of work is being stubborn about this and its stressing me out. Pretty much if they force me into work they'll be breaking the law and considering I work for the health service you would have thought they'd be looking out for their staff? Anyway... So, yeah, its been stressing me out the last few weeks and my writing has been affected.

I hope to update this weekend as well but it depends on how much I can get done between now and this weekend and if I can get the work stuff sorted...

Anyway, sorry for the rant... Please do enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty

The Ambush

Wednesday 8th August 2018

Sanctuary II, Earth’s Orbit

Peter sat back in the cell he had been placed in, hugging his knees to his chest. Beside him, in another cell, was his Aunt May. A force-field had been set up between them and they were unable to touch one another, only comfort the other with words. May’s body was shaking consistently, her eyes tear-stained and her frequent sobs rent the air.

Peter was trying to be strong.
It had happened so fast, so unexpectedly. He hadn’t had a chance to react.

One moment he’d been sitting down to dinner with his Aunt, and the next aliens had beamed themselves into their apartment and taken them, threatening to kill his Aunt if Peter attempted anything. And he would never put her life in danger. Surrendering and coming quietly had been his only option. He’d had no reason to believe they would keep her alive if he agreed to go with them, thankfully they had.

They didn’t know why they were here, nor had they seen anyone apart from a group of alien warriors. But Peter knew. He could guess why they had come for them.

*Mr Stark.*

Why else take them if they were not going to be used as a bargaining chip?

The worst part of all was that he hadn’t been wearing his suit otherwise he’d have the resources on him to potentially get them out.

His enhanced hearing picked up the sound of footsteps from down the corridor. Hard and powerful, they made the grating tremble. There was only one being who those footsteps could belong to. Peter felt his heart turn cold as the Titan, the alien who Tony had been preparing against for so long, stepped into view, casting his eyes over his two prisoners.

Peter noticed his Aunt look up, and press herself further back against the wall as Thanos leaned forward.

“You are here for a specific reason only.”

“He won’t surrender,” muttered Peter, not intending to speak but the words had fallen out of his mouth before he could have stopped them.

“I think he will,” stated Thanos smugly. “I’ve seen into his head. Stark cares for you deeply.”

“I’m not important to him,” continued Peter, trying to deflect the Titan’s curiosity in him.

Thanos smirked. “You are one of the few people he cares about. If I’d been able to acquire his wife, she’d be here in your place. Or better yet his daughter.”

Surprised by that, Peter scrunched his face up. “Mr Stark doesn’t have a daughter.”

“Not yet he doesn’t but he will.”

Peter wasn’t sure how to absorb this new piece of information. He knew Mr Stark had come from the future, but he hadn’t revealed much about his previous time, other than that Thanos had won. Now he was seeking to accomplish the same things. What he didn’t understand was why his Aunt had been taken too. He wasn’t sure it was wise to ask the question.

Thanos seemed to eerily know what he was thinking about. “You will not struggle or attempt anything whilst we have her. I’ve been keeping an eye on this planet for a while, especially on those well acquainted with Tony Stark. Holding you means he will attempt to rescue you. He will fail of course. And then he will be mine, and the Universe will be remade with a snap of my fingers.” In demonstration, Thanos snapped his fingers. “Now, stay quiet and sensible, boy, and you and your Aunt will live through this.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” Peter wasn’t naive enough to believe his captor was telling him
the truth.

Thanos leaned forward a tiny bit more. “I always keep my word, even to my enemies.”

Peter watched him leave, and then shifted on the floor so he could face his Aunt. “I’m sorry…”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not your fault.”

He was afraid she would continue and blame Mr. Stark but she didn’t, which he was thankful for. He did know the others would come for them, no matter how much he hoped they wouldn’t.

Mr. Stark wasn’t going to allow Peter to stay a prisoner for long. Peter knew that for sure.

“I’m sure they’ll come for us…” he whispered quietly to her.

Her lips trembled. “But at what cost?”

Peter dared not to think of what the consequences could be.

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Avenger’s Compound

They had a plan in place. One that was quite risky but they had no other choice at present. Everyone wanted Tony to stay behind because he was the one Thanos wanted but he refused to do so, knowing going would be a high risk, but one he felt was worth doing.

They would split into two groups.

One was the Extraction group whose primary goal was to rescue Peter and his Aunt. Natasha was leading this team. Pepper, Clint, Bruce, Vision and Sam were all on her team. Vision, though he no longer had the use of the Mind Stone, still had high volumes of strength due to his genetic make-up and could be of some use to the team. Specially designed armour had been created for him by Tony. Bruce was still unable to turn into the Hulk, despite multiple attempts to do so. He was on Natasha’s team because he could provide medical aid if any was needed. He had rudimentary training, enough that he could help others in need. Once they had succeeded in their goal, Natasha, Clint, and Sam would join Tony’s group.

The second team was the Ambush group. This group comprised of Tony, Steve, Rhodey, Thor, Wanda, Carol, Bucky, Doctor Strange, T’Challa and the Guardians of the Galaxy making an attempt to attack Thanos, in the hope of taking him down. They knew it was dangerous for Tony to be in this group but they expected Thanos to leave as soon as he realised Tony wasn’t with the group attacking him. Tony hoped that keeping Thanos’ attention on him would enable the others to rescue Peter and Aunt May.

He did have to stay away from Thanos though. Carol had told them she’d been able to use her powers up until a certain distance when her powers had suddenly stopped working. She estimated it to be around two hundred metres. Once Thanos had her within range, he didn’t move out of it, only doing so when he left her. Once he was gone, she could use her powers again. The device on his wrist issued a blocking frequency, one that likely extended to both Tony’s and Wanda’s powers. No one really knew that Natasha had powers too but both she and Tony figured she’d be affected if she came into range of them.

Because of Thanos’ defences against them, Wanda intended to stay away from Thanos as much as possible but at least she was able to attack him from a distance. Tony could attack Thanos from the
same distance but he had elected to use his suit instead, giving him the chance to face him one-on-one.

At least that way he’d be able to get up close against Thanos without having to worry about not being able to defend himself.

They hoped they might be able to remove the device on Thanos’ wrist, which would then allow Carol and Tony to go out at full power against the Titan and bring him down.

It was a risky strategy; one they hoped could end this today.

The danger was Thanos would have a strategy to detain Tony. He wanted him alive, and, no doubt, the Titan had spent the last few months preparing his army and his children to ensure Tony was captured. It wouldn’t be so easy to just grab him.

T’Challa had offered his services from Wakanda and Doctor Strange had arrived at the facility, offering his own aid. He’d then gone to Wakanda to bring T’Challa back to the Facility.

If Thanos was to make another attack, the Wakandan army was on stand-by.

They had located his ship, drifting just within Earth’s atmosphere, hovering over New York, no doubt the city being his first target if he needed to launch his army. Residents were being told to stay inside and to follow Government advice, not that they were following them.

If everything went according to plan, today would be the day it all ended.

---

They all stood in a circle, hands linked together. Tony had his eyes closed, his body slightly glowing through his Iron Man suit he wore. Minutes before, Doctor Strange had produced a portal for Natasha and her small team to use to reach Thanos’ ship. Tony’s team could have used the same portal and branched off into Thanos’ ship, however Tony wanted to try transporting them all there with one jump.

At least then he would know he was capable of such a feat.

“Ready?” Tony asked, his mind focusing on where he wanted to go. *Take me to Thanos.*

He felt a lurch and then suddenly they were there, right where they needed to be, standing in the middle of Thanos’ command chamber, the Titan standing right in front of them, ready for their arrival.

Releasing the others hands, Tony stepped in front of his group, his lips sliding up in a taunting smile. “If you want me, come and get me!”

His helmet slid down in front of his face and he flew into action, the others racing behind him.

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“Peter? What was that?” Aunt May whispered quietly through the bars.

“I think someone has come to rescue us,” answered Peter. He felt positive about his assertions and hopeful. They hadn’t been held for too long and they had both remained unharmed.

There were shouts and blaster shots echoing down the corridor, sounds of thuds and cries for aid as whatever battle was taking place was getting closer.
Peter could sense them now, his senses dialled up past eleven. It wouldn’t be too long now, surely?

---

Natasha ducked, and kicked out, twisting her body lithely as she stabbed one of the Chitauri guards in the gut. Clint fired an array of arrows from behind, his aim truthful and not missing a shot. They’d reached the prison cell block with ease, which had surprised her, but Natasha supposed Thanos didn’t care if his prisoners escaped.

They’d served their purpose in bringing Tony to him. All he had to do was isolate Tony from the others and block his powers and overpower him to detain him. The whole plan was risky but they had known it from the start.

Pepper in her Rescue suit flew over the top of the Chitauri, firing lasers at them, twisting back towards the prison block door. Just one more barrier to get through.

Vision was lithe and quick, moving around the corridor with ease, distracting the Chitauri so Clint could target them and take them down one by one.

There was only a small platoon of guards in the corridor. Only six and they were dealt with quickly.

“Come on! Pepper, do you think you can blow the door down?”

Pepper nodded, raised her arm, ordering the nanites to form a canon and fired. The door flew open, bashing against the sides of the wall.

Leading the way, they ran down the corridor, skidding to a halt in front of two cells.

“Peter! May!” Pepper’s faceplate slid up, her eyes wide with relief. “Neither of you are hurt?”

Peter scrambled to his feet from behind the bars. “We’re fine. They haven’t hurt us.” He was smiling broadly. “Where’s Mr. Stark?”

Pepper couldn’t help but grin. “You know he’s Tony to you.”

Beside her, Natasha was attaching a small device to the door pad to release the bars. She was trying to get May out first.

Peter shrugged. “Where is Tony?”

“With the others, distracting Thanos,” admitted Pepper.

“But that’s what Thanos wanted!” Peter was shocked.

Natasha grimaced as she released the bars to May’s cell, giving Pepper the opportunity to get the other woman out. She started work on Peter’s cell door. “The problem is, kid, is that if Tony came here to rescue you, Thanos would have likely left who attacked him to grab Tony here. If we remove you and your Aunt from Thanos’ hold, he cannot use you against Tony.” She leaned back on her legs as the cell door opened and Peter stumbled out into his Aunt’s arms.

“But if he’s fighting him…” Peter reasoned but Natasha interrupted him.

“We’re not thinking of the alternatives, Peter. Tony had to come on the mission one way or another. Now we’ve got you and your Aunt safe, we can get you back to the Compound and the rest of us can go assist Tony.”
“One problem, Nat,” raised Clint, “how are we getting back to the Compound from here?”

Natasha grinned. “Sam has wings, Pepper has thrusters. They’ll take May and Peter to safety. Pepper’s armour can hold two people. Bruce is going to. He’ll do a full check-up on them back at the Compound. We only bought Bruce along in case we needed medical here.”

“I’m fine,” murmured Peter. “I can fight.”

May shook her head, interrupting her nephew. “No. You’re coming with me. You have no suit.”

“And we didn’t bring one with us either,” said Pepper. “Tony wants you both safe. It’s our job to make sure we complete it.”

Natasha could see Peter’s reluctance. “Kid, now isn’t the time to put yourself in danger. For Tony’s sake, stay safe.” She handed him a small breathing apparatus. “You’ll need this. The ship is quite high up.” She could see Sam had already fitted May with one.

“I don’t think I have much of a choice, do I?” Peter shrugged sadly.

Pepper turned towards Natasha. “I’m relying on you on bringing Tony back.”

Natasha’s lips twitched. She didn’t want to make any promises. “I’ll try my best.”

Pepper slid her helmet down over her face.

Sam was busy instructing May to hold tightly to around his neck and keep her legs around his waist so he’d still be able to fly, and Pepper had Peter gripping one side of her back and Bruce the other. They stepped back to the other side of the corridor.

“Ready?” Clint asked, readying his bow. He would blow a hole in the wall with one of his arrows, one which had been modified for that purpose.

“Let’s go for it!” said Sam, slipping his breathing apparatus into his mouth.

Natasha stepped back with Vision and Clint aimed and fired at the back of the wall into one of the cells. There was a blast and air were sweeping through. Thankfully they were not in its sight and were not pulled out, however Sam and Pepper allowed themselves to be pulled out into the atmosphere, taking May, Peter and Bruce with them.

Turning, Natasha ran from the corridor. “Come on! We’ve got to get to Tony!”

“Doesn’t anyone find it odd they placed the cells so close to the hull?” asked Vision as they ran down the corridor.

“Who cares?” replied Clint, running up to join them. “We rescued them!”

But Natasha had guessed why they were there. If they hadn’t been rescued, no doubt Thanos would have ejected them into space in front of Tony. Or killed them if Tony had failed to face him. Removing them from Thanos’ custody had been a priority.

“Come on,” urged Natasha. She felt anxious and concerned. She just didn’t feel now was the time they would win this. And she really hoped it wasn’t going to be what she thought it was going to be either.
He’d kept his distance as much as he could from Stark and the two women with powers. This trap had been long in the making and Thanos did not want to be caught within his own net when he sprung it. He already knew his two prisoners had escaped but that didn’t matter.

Today, Stark would be his.

Again.

But this time he knew how to hold him, and if the device he now had in his secondary command chamber worked the way it should, he’d be able to channel Stark’s powers, harnessing them for himself whilst using the man as an energy source. It was a plan that had taken weeks to prepare.

One thing was for sure, those with powers imbued by the Infinity Stones would not be leaving this place.

As long as he obtained Stark he didn’t care about the other two but it was better to take them all down at the same time.

Thanos smirked. He was looking forward to springing his trap.

No matter how many times Stark tried to come up at him, one of his children always got in the way. Thanos wasn’t in the mood to fight today. He didn’t need to. He had armies of Chitauri ready to do battle. With each one killed, another five joined the fray.

Oh, he would enjoy unleashing his ambush.

They thought they were ambushing him.

_Fools. Stark should know not to underestimate me._

The fact Stark had was greatly amusing.

He’d moved himself to the balcony overlooking the command chamber. He saw three new figures enter the chamber. Ah, their arrival meant he could spring his trap.

It was time.

----

Natasha flew straight into attacking a Chitauri as soon as she arrived in the command chamber. It was a mess. So many of them roamed the chamber, taking on the Avengers, and Thanos watched from on high.

Gritting her teeth, Natasha ducked and twisted, swinging out with her batons striking one of the Chitauri down. She could see Tony in his suit, not using his powers, trying to get close to Thanos but kept being stopped by consistent attacks from either Chitauri or his children.

This wasn’t the time to get Thanos.

Natasha recognised that. Part of this mission had been successful, the other part hadn’t.

As she twisted again, grabbed a dagger from her belt and stabbed a Chitauri with it, Natasha rolled onto her knees, and then a wave hit her.

Energy rocked through her body and she felt drained, her strength taken from her in an instant. _Tony. Tony_… She tried to reach for their link but couldn’t. Something was wrong… very wrong…
Her vision blurred and her head throbbed. Sickness welled in her stomach.

Then she heard the screaming.

Succeeding in pushing herself up, Natasha glanced up and saw Tony, Wanda and Carol trapped in electrical nets, consistently electrocuting them. Somehow Tony’s suit had retracted back into his Arc Reactor and it was from all three of them the screams came as their bodies flayed in their bonds.

Carol’s hands barely glowed, nor did Wanda’s.

Staggering forwards, Natasha saw something fall around them, glass cages, locking into the deck.

Tony’s body was shaking in pain as the electrical current pulsed through his body. She couldn’t hear the words he was trying to say through the glass but she could guess.

*Leave, Nat!*

Pepper would kill her for leaving Tony behind. She still felt queasy. And she could see the others were still struggling to regain their feet.

She had no choice.

She had to make the call…

Her voice cracked as she raised it. “Everyone… retreat! Retreat…”

Doctor Strange responded first, circling his arms in a motion, creating a portal that would take them back to the Compound.

The Chitauri and Thanos’ children surged forward but the Titan’s impounding voice stopped them.

“Let them leave. I have what I need.”

“We can’t leave them!” shouted Steve, anger across his face.

He didn’t seem as affected by whatever had hit Natasha. Nor were any of the Guardians who were quickly passing through Strange’s portal.

Natasha blinked, her head pounding. “This isn’t over, Steve…” She caught a glance at Rhodey as he approached them in his War Machine suit, parts of it falling apart. “We’ll be back for them… I promise…”

It was too late to save Carol, Wanda and Tony… The Chitauri were already surrounding their prisons. Any attempt to free them now would be pointless.

She turned away, allowing Steve to help her towards Strange’s portal. “I think…” she muttered as she passed through, “we were supposed to lose today.”

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Avenger’s Compound

“How could you leave him?” Pepper shouted. “You knew Thanos wanted him and you just… left!”

Natasha bowed her head. It had been her call to make the decision. She had hated every minute of
issuing that order.

She’d felt instantly better as soon as they arrived on Earth, whatever had been affecting her no longer had any influence over her. They had all assembled in the common area of the Compound.

Ever since being shown the future on Vormir, Natasha had been preparing for this very scenario. “This can be fixed. We can still stop Thanos.”

“But if he drains the Stones from Stark, he won’t be,” retorted Sam.

“I saw this happen,” she replied. “I was shown the future on Vormir, the day we got the Soul Stone. I thought they were just events that could happen but I think it was a future, to show me how we could prepare for this.”

Steve stepped forward, folding his arms over his chest. “But we haven’t prepared and now we’ve lost Carol, Wanda and Tony!”

But Natasha was remembering what she’d seen. Tony had been held in some sort of machine, his body shimmering with six different colours… And Thanos had the power of all six stones… “This is the path to victory. No, this has to happen. Thanos won’t win. This is just a set-back for us but we will triumph. I think I know how we can fix this.”

“How?” asked Bruce quietly.

Natasha was smiling because they’d been given a lifeline. Thanos had allowed them to escape and this would be his undoing.

They still lacked one member of their team; one they hadn’t called in because there had been no reason to do so. But now was the time they were needed. She fixed Sam with a stare, knowing what he’d mean when she spoke.

“Simple. With the help of some very small friends.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

I really do not like this chapter at all... I'll probably revise this one at some point.

Tony, Carol and Wanda were always going to be caught.

And, yes, if you caught the hint at the end, Ant-Man and the Wasp will be appearing in the next chapter!

I hope to post again this weekend but there is no guarantee of that. If not it will be the following weekend :)

And, if you are looking for a good fic to read, please take a look at a fic called Reality by KelpieLurks, it is a fantastic AU fic and it doesn't get enough love!
Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirty-One: Ant-Man and the Wasp

Chapter Summary

Ant-Man and the Wasp arrive!

Chapter Notes

My apologies... this chapter took a lot longer than I thought it would.

As I said in the last update, I was having problems with work and getting the permission required to go into 12 weeks 'Shielding' to protect me from Covid-19 since I am an extremely vulnerable person due to transplant and being on immune-suppression drugs. The good news is, is that it is all sorted now. So, I am now at home for the foreseeable future, not allowed to leave the house at all, apart from to go into the garden for fresh air and exercise. It also means I have a lot of time on my hands to write. Now that work is sorted out, I should be able to write a lot in a short space of time. Weekly updates should resume from this Sunday.

I hope you all enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-One

Ant-Man and the Wasp

Wednesday 8\textsuperscript{th} August 2018

Sanctuary II

Secondary Command Chamber

Tony had been dragged, securely bound, to another Command Chamber. Thanos had walked behind him, using the device on his wrist to ensure Tony’s own powers remained suppressed. Carol and Wanda had been left behind. They remained out-cold in their own glass prisons, unable to escape. Gas had been pumped into their prisons, rendering them unconscious.

This Control Chamber was located right in the very centre of the ship, opposed to the main Command Chamber they had been captured in. This specific room was cool and dark, most of the consoles were in sleep mode, but on the other side of the room, a machine stood tall, constructed against the wall. Right in the centre of the machine were four cuffs adjacent to one another.

“This machine was built specifically for you,” Thanos explained. “You have taken all the Infinity Stones and absorbed them. You hold the powers of the universe, the very ones I require to balance the universe. I could kill you in the hope the Stones are released from you but it is a risk I cannot take in case they hide again from me. Their destiny is with me, not with a weak human like
Tony refused to answer. Thanos didn’t deserve one. If the Stones had merged with him, he was far more worthy than the Titan ever could be. He couldn’t escape from the bonds and he knew he wouldn’t be able to free himself with his suit. The Arc Reactor had been removed from him, leaving him defenceless and without his suit. His powers were suppressed by Thanos’ device and the Titan was staying as close to him as possible to reinforce the block on Tony’s powers.

The Chitauri dragging him along the floor hauled him up high, pressing him against the wall of the device. The cuffs slid down from the centre of the machine. One wrist was freed and though he tried to struggle he was stopped, and his hand was forced into the cuff above his head. The same for his other hand and his feet until he was securely bound.

The wall slide back up and Tony was suspended in the centre of the machine.

Thanos held his wrist up, still blocking Tony’s powers. “This device is designed to drain you of your powers, to lock onto the energy signature the Stones emit. You see that Gauntlet there –” He pointed towards a Gauntlet situated on the other side of the room, directly in the line of where Tony was positioned, “- the Stones should become fully formed within it, allowing me to use the Stones to my will. You will be the conductor I need to channel them. This machine should drain you of your powers, whether they remove them completely or not remains to be seen, but the principle is simple. You’ll still be the one to help me save the universe.”

Tony glared at his enemy as he hung in the machine.

Thanos moved to a control console. “There is just one more thing I need to do.” He pulled a lever down and something dropped onto Tony’s head, encasing his skull tightly. “This will continue to block your usage of your abilities. Now, shall we begin?”

“I’d rather not,” noted Tony. He knew this was going to hurt. He hoped Thanos had miscalculated and the Stones powers could not be drained from him. But Thanos had been quiet for a few months now, and he’d spent time forming a plan, one that was very likely to work. “Have you ever considered you could be wrong?”

Thanos’ hand hovered over the controls. “Wrong about what?”

“You way of trying to save the universe. Murdering billions of people is wrong. Why can you not save it in a way that preserves life?” asked Tony, knowing it was futile to appeal to Thanos. The Titan had already made up his mind.

“There is no way to preserve all life in the universe. There are simply not enough resources to sustain the levels of life we have now,” continued Thanos. “The only way is balance. Removing half of all life brings the universe into balance.”

Tony would have shaken his head if he’d been able to. “No, it doesn’t. Taking away half of all life removes half of the resources too.” Earth had struggled during the five years. Half the population hadn’t just vanished, half the animals, half the trees and plants… half the resources were gone in an instant. He suspected Thanos had never known what he’d done, simply believing he’d done the right thing and only removed half of the population of the universe. “I lived through it before. Don’t make the same mistakes as you did before! It’s not too late.”

Trying to appeal to Thanos’ better nature was unlikely to work but it was something he figured he could attempt. Thanos knew he was from the future.
“Who says I’m planning on killing half of all life?” Thanos mused out loud. “I meant to but you gave me knowledge, Stark. Knowledge, I have studied and used to decide what my best course of action is.”

Shit…

“Your memories have shown me there will always be resistance. There will always be those who seek to defy the will of the Universe.”

Tony snorted. “The will of the Universe? What you’re doing is the will of the Universe is it?”

“I am saving it,” stated Thanos. “The Universe will realise this.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. Thanos was… deluded. He thought he knew better than the Universe? That he could teach it a new way, that he could impose his own will upon it?

“The Universe will be reborn. I will remake it in my own image. A life worth living.” A twisted grin crossed the Titan’s face. “Now, shall we begin?”

Seconds later, Tony was screaming.

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**Pym Residence**

**San Francisco**

She’d decided not to call ahead as Natasha hadn’t wanted Hank Pym to vanish when they required his help. Or rather the help of Scott Lang and Hank’s daughter, Hope. But Natasha knew, considering what they wanted their help with, it was likely Hank might stand in their way, and so Natasha had not come alone to meet them.

Pepper landed beside her, the Rescue suit retracted back into its Arc Reactor, as Natasha’s did the same. The fastest method of transport to get to San Francisco had been to use the Iron Man suits. They’d crossed America in record time. They could have asked Doctor Strange to portal them across but he’d briefly returned to Bleeker Street and had been unavailable.

Still, the flight over had given Pepper a bit more experience with the suit. No doubt she’d be fighting with it soon, especially once they freed Tony. None of them were naïve in thinking they would be safe from Thanos’ anger. Once Tony was free and able to use his powers again, Pepper would become his target. Trying to keep her safe would be impossible. No doubt Thanos had the advanced technology to find anyone on the planet, no matter where they hid.

“This the place?” Pepper enquired, looking up at the house which looked out of place on the modern street. It was an old mansion. “They moved, didn’t they?”

Natasha nodded. “The house wasn’t originally on this street. Hank Pym likes to move around… Help keeps his enemies away. Not entirely sure how he gets away with moving an entire house from the neighbourhood.” She tilted her head to the side. “Though, I believe, it isn’t something he does on a regular basis. I believe this house has been on this street for a while now.”

“Just seems very out of place,” noted Pepper.

They stepped up to the gates. There was an intercom attached to the side and Natasha pressed the button located at the bottom.
A crispy voice echoed over it. “Who is it?”

“Natasha Romanoff and Pepper Potts-Stark to see Hank Pym,” replied Natasha. She wasn’t expecting a warm welcome. The Pym’s and the Stark’s had never got on well. “We need to talk to him on urgent business.”

There was silence from the other end.

“Must be checking,” winced Pepper. “I always intended on trying to get a deal between Pym and Stark Industries but I hadn’t got around to putting an offer forward. Wish I had now.”

The same crispy voice echoed back over the intercom. “You may proceed.”

The gates opened and Natasha and Pepper walked through. The gates closed behind them and they walked up the driveway to the front door. On the doorstep stood a young woman, her hair tied behind her and her arms folded over her chest.

“He doesn’t want to see either of you,” she said quietly.

Natasha recognised her as Hope van Dyne, the daughter of Hank Pym. “But he will?”

“Depends on what you’ve come to say,” shrugged Hope.

Pepper stepped forward. “We need your help.”

“Father will love this,” mused Hope. “Follow me. He’s in his study.”

Natasha followed Hope with Pepper at the back. They walked down a corridor, turned right into the lounge, passed through it, and then into another corridor, down a set of steps into the basement where Hank Pym was waiting for them. Beside him was his wife, Janet, who had been rescued from the Quantum Realm a few months ago, though her return hadn’t been widely announced. Nat had been aware of this from before, assuming the same events had unfolded, though Scott wouldn’t have been on the run from the law this time around.

“I wondered how soon you would come to me for help,” said Hank, leaning back in his chair.

Natasha spied Scott leaning against the opposite wall. “The world stands on the tip of an iceberg. We can either drown with it or rise with it. You know what is happening above New York. You know there is an alien force above us, who has the power to destroy us. But we can still win this, but to do so, we need your help. Specifically, Scott and Hope.”

“Why us?” asked Hope.

“Because you’re small enough to sneak onboard the spaceship and free our friends,” explained Pepper. “I know the Pym’s and the Stark’s have never gotten on but Tony will owe you if you can help him.”

“You want us to help rescue a Stark?” Hank pulled a face. His expression was a clear indication of how he felt about that.

“We need him,” replied Natasha, gritting her teeth. “The Universe depends on him.”

“I’m sure the Universe can survive without a Stark in it,” replied Hank.

Pepper was about to retort but Janet got there first.
“Hank! I know you and Howard had your issues but is there any reason why you have to transfer your hatred onto his son? What has Tony Stark ever done to you?” Janet fiercely demanded to know.

Hank shrunk a bit in his chair. “Nothing directly.”

“We’re going to help them, Hank,” retorted Janet. She glanced up, her grey hair falling about her face. “What do you need?”

Natasha smiled gratefully. “We need Ant-Man and the Wasp.”

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Avengers Compound

Despite Hank’s protests both Scott Lang and Hope van Dyne agreed to help. They knew what was at stake though they were unaware of Tony’s true potential. Neither Natasha or Pepper felt comfortable with sharing the knowledge of Tony’s powers to the Pym’s, only that it was vital Tony was rescued, alongside Wanda and Carol.

Both Scott and Hope hitched a ride back to the Compound with Natasha and Pepper in their suits. Thanos’ ship still remained in orbit. The US army was, quite reluctantly, holding off on attacking the ship, mainly because they’d already attempted to launch an attack and had been foiled by Thanos’ own forces.

The World Security Council had issued a plea to the rest of the countries to avoid attacking. Natasha had spoken to the World Security Council and explained the threat would be neutralised by the Avengers but first, they had to free Tony and they had a plan to do so. It might be tricky but it was one which should work.

They all stood in the Conference Room of the Compound, discussing their next steps.

“So, let me get this straight,” began Scott, “you want us to go up to Thanos’ ship, infiltrate it and free Stark, right?”

“And Wanda and Carol too,” replied Steve.

“Isn’t it going to be guarded?” enquired Hope.

“We hope you wouldn’t be detected because you are so small,” pointed out Natasha. “Thanos needs Tony to get the Infinity Stones from him. He’s in a machine that will allow Thanos to achieve this. The only reason he isn’t attacking the Earth is that he has yet to take the Stones from Tony.” Natasha bit her lower lip. “It won’t be long before he gets them.”

“But will freeing Tony release any of the Stones from Thanos that he may have already taken?” Steve said.

“We don’t know. We’ve got to hope freeing Tony will enable him to take back all his powers.”

“Hard to believe a Stark has been given powers…” mused Hope.

“It’s… complicated…” replied Natasha. “There is a lot going on you’ve only been partial too. But we do not have the time to reveal everything. Without Tony, we will lose. And you two are our only hope right now. As soon as you’ve got him free, you can leave. We do not expect you two to do anything more.”
Scott and Hope exchanged a quick glance and then smiled at one another. “We’ll stay until the end.”

“Are we not forgetting something?” Rhodey pointed out. “The device on his wrist. He’ll just block their powers again.”

“Already thought of a solution,” smiled Natasha. “If our Ant-Man and a Wasp are planning on staying with us…”

“Isn’t it too risky to ask this of them?” Steve frowned, concerned by the implication of what Natasha was considering.

“What else can we do?” Natasha queried. “We need to get rid of the wrist device somehow.”

“Couldn’t another team be sent, small-size?” Clint suggested.

“They might not have enough Pym Particles,” noted Natasha.

Hope stepped forward and placed her hands on the desk. “If I understand what you are asking us to do… You want us to free Stark from this machine and I assume sabotage it, right?” Natasha nodded. “And you also would like us to help you sabotage a wrist device that is on this Thanos which is blocking powers?”

“If you can…” said Natasha.

“I think it would be better if there were two teams. If we destroy this machine, we might not get a chance to get to Thanos. Surely the two attacks should be simultaneous?” theorised Hope. She reached into her suit which she still wore and pulled out a sachet of Pym Particles. “We have enough for other people to use.”

Steve looked around the room, casting his gaze across every face. “The question is, who does what?”

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In the end, it was decided for Scott and Hope to focus upon freeing Tony with Natasha tagging along with them. Doctor Strange had offered to portal them directly to the ship. He knew exactly where the ship was located and he could easily get them on board unnoticed.

Steve, Clint, Bucky, and Thor would attempt to free Carol and Wanda, but not before sabotaging Thanos’ wrist device. Being small would allow them to reach it and their plan consisted of Steve and Thor focusing on the wrist device and then distracting Thanos, whilst Bucky and Clint attempted to free Carol and Wanda. Once they were all free, Doctor Strange would conjure a portal and get them back to Earth.

It was a dangerous mission but the key assignments were ensuring Tony was freed and Thanos’ device was broken. They anticipated Thanos would pursue them and begin an attack on Earth. Whilst the others were carrying out the mission, Pepper and T’Challa would be marshalling the world to fight against Thanos, whilst Rhodey liaised with the Accords Committee and the US Army.

By the time Thanos made his move, the world would be ready.

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Sanctuary II

Secondary Command Chamber

Tony was still weakly screaming. A constant glow of six colours seemed to be emitting from his body, heading towards the Gauntlet mounted in front of him. The six Infinity Stones were slowly forming within it, his powers slowly being drained.

He couldn’t do anything to stop this from happening. Thanos kept returning to check on his progress, getting frustrated at the slow nature of how the Stones were forming, taking longer than the Titan wanted. Thankfully, now Tony was on his own.

Tony was sure Natasha was planning something. He knew they wouldn’t leave him. They’d be coming back… But would it be too late?

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It was odd looking at the world from an ant-size but Natasha could see the advantages of being so small. Arriving in the chamber Tony was being held in, the first thing that had rocked their ears, was Tony’s continued weak screams.

Tony was held high up in the machine and directly across from him was the Gauntlet where the Infinity Stones were slowly manifesting.

“Is that…” whispered Hope.

Natasha nodded. “It is. If we dislodge the Gauntlet…”

“It will stop the machine,” finished Hope. “We’ll start trying to free him if you can try to dislodge the Gauntlet.” Hope took Scott by the arms and flew up towards where Tony hang in the machine.

Natasha activated her boot thrusters, taking her up towards where the Gauntlet was stationed. She remained small, hovering beside it. Inspecting the Gauntlet, it was placed on a holder so that the back of it faced Tony. She could see the Stones appearing, shimmering in front of her. They still had not fully materialised. At least three-quarters of each Stone had now fully embedded themselves into the Gauntlet, suggesting the process was nearly complete. But how to dislodge the Gauntlet?

“I suppose becoming normal size wouldn’t be a problem…” Yet she didn’t know if Thanos was watching this room… but the others should be in the midst of their own attack by now. “It’s a risk I’ll have to take.” She activated her comm-unit. “Scott, Hope? I’m heading back to normal size. I’ll need to if I want to move this Gauntlet.”

They acknowledged before Natasha pressed the button on her wrist and she found herself returning to normal size, still hovering in the air beside the Gauntlet’s resting place.


Ignoring him, Natasha gripped the Gauntlet with both hands. It was heavy but she managed to roll it off its post and watched it tumble to the ground. The light emanating from Tony’s chest to the Gauntlet disappeared and she saw the outline of the Stones that had been appearing in the Gauntlet, had now disappeared and the colour stream was sinking back into Tony.

She flew up to him. “You okay?”
“Bit better now…” he managed. “Thanks. How did you -?”

“Scott and Hope,” she answered. “They are in the machine. Trying to disable it so it cannot be used again.”

Tony glanced up. “If you get this helmet off me, I’ll be able to use my powers and get myself out.”

Natasha hovered a little higher and gripped the helmet on Tony’s head. “Um… I don’t think I can get it off.”

“Why not?”

“Can you not feel the needles?” She could see the helmet had an array of needles penetrating Tony’s skull.

“I didn’t…” He hadn’t realised. “Hurts a lot. And now uncomfortable.”

“We’ll get you out of here.”

“No, you will not,” a smooth, silky voice said from behind her.

Natasha turned and saw one of Thanos’ children, Ebony Maw, hovering in the air. She recognised him. He was the one who had Sorcerer-like powers. In his hands, he held the Gauntlet which he then placed back on the slab, directly in front of Tony.

“Stark stays with us. He has what we need.” He adjusted the positioning of the Gauntlet and suddenly Tony was screaming again as the constant glow began to seep out of his body again, manifesting the Stones back into the Gauntlet.

“No!” Natasha growled, clenching her fists, and flying towards Ebony Maw, twisting in mid-air before lashing out and trying to land a kick to his face.

Maw ducked down but reached up at the same time to grab Natasha by the leg. He swung her across the room and she went tumbling through the air before she brought herself to a stop.

“You cannot free him. You cannot stop our machine,” he hissed.

Natasha grinned. He didn’t know about Scott or Hope and that gave her the advantage. All she had to do was keep him distracted long enough for the machine to be disabled and Tony freed.

She ducked again as Maw circled around her, conjuring up pieces of equipment and throwing them towards her. She used her thrusters to duck and dive to avoid each throw, trying to get closer to him with each pass.

Spying a piece of rope, Natasha dived down, grabbed it with both hands, engaged both her thrusters and flew at speed towards Maw. She circled him, attempting to tie him up, already knowing it would be futile but it was an attempt to keep him distracted from Tony. Floating around him, she kicked and punched out at Maw, grazing his body as he moved fast to avoid her hits.

“Do not believe we did not foresee your attempt at rescue,” taunted Maw. “The others will fail.”

“What others?” she feigned surprise. She assumed he was aware of Steve and the others.

“Whatever way you got here; you will not escape. You are better to surrender now rather than earn the wrath of Thanos,” advised Maw.
Natasha smirked. “I think the Avengers earned it a long time ago when we kicked his army out of New York.”

“Thanos is only interested in Stark. None of you are important.” Maw’s eyes turned to slits.

Natasha grinned, clenched her right fist. “Oh, you are really going to regret underestimating me.” Thrusters kicked to life and she shot around the back of Maw, grabbing him by the shoulders and swinging him around and flew straight towards the Gauntlet.

The resounding crash caused the Gauntlet to tumble back to the floor again.

Maw glared at Natasha. “You’ll regret that.”

She smirked and straightened. “Maybe. But I think you’ll be the one regretting it.”

The humming from the machine suddenly stopped as if it had lost all power. Tony’s cuffs opened up and he slid down to the ground, carefully removing the helmet from his head.

Maw’s face was a picture. “How is this possible?”

“With a little help from the inside,” Natasha replied as Scott and Hope returned to a normal size having sabotaged the machine.

Tony was stepping forward, his body glowing with the full power of the Infinity Stones. “I’m going to give you a chance to leave and fight another time or I kill you now.”

Maw growled in his throat. “Retreat is never an option.”

Tony shrugged. “Fine with me. Bye!”

Maw leapt forward but Tony was too quick. He dodged and made a portal which his attacker was unable to avoid, flying through it, right out into the middle of space, his body swelling in milliseconds, before the remaining air was burned out of his lungs. Maw was gone, dead and no longer a threat. Tony closed the portal.

“Why can you just not do that to Thanos?” Scott said stepping forward. “This would be over in seconds.”

“Because Thanos can breathe in space,” Tony said instantly, his body glowing with six colours as he spoke. He shook his head. “What? That wasn’t me…”

“Your body glowed,” noted Natasha. “The Stones… like on Knowhere.” She smiled slyly. “Guess they wanted us to have that information…”

“It’s a bit disconcerting that the Stones can take control of me…” Tony winced. “Like all, I am to them is an experiment… a plaything of theirs.” He glanced down at his hands. “I hope these powers are not permanent.”

Natasha winced, the reaction going unnoticed. She knew the truth. She just hoped Tony would be given the truth soon.

Tony glanced back at the machine that had been keeping him captive. “He can’t use it again, can he?”

Scott placed his hands on his hips, straightened and grinned. “Nope! We took out quite a few connections inside it. For him to even find out what’s wrong with it, he’ll have to take the whole
machine apart.”

Hope held up a small disc-shaped device. “We did think of detonating it.”

Tony nodded. “Set it up, deep inside the machine. Give it fifteen minutes. It’ll allow us enough time to get the others out and escape.”

Hope shrunk and flew off to the machine, returning a minute later. “Set and ready to go.”

“Thanks for coming after me,” he said, activating his powers and opening another portal. “Let’s go and help the others.”

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Central Command Chamber

Sanctuary II

They arrived in the midst of a furious battle on both sides. Chitauri swarmed the Central Command Chamber and Thanos was swinging a double-bladed sword, wearing his full armour, as he attacked the others. Steve, Clint, Bucky and Thor were all at normal size, and Carol was flitting around the chamber at full power, with Wanda unleashing her own powers against the Chitauri. With their powers freed, Thanos’ wrist device had been successfully sabotaged.

When Tony leapt through into the Central Command Chamber with Natasha, Scott and Hope by his side, his focus went straight to the Titan who yelled angrily at seeing him free.

“How dare you seek to defy the will of the Universe, Stark!” Thanos raged, running towards Tony, swinging his double-bladed sword, but Tony merely conjured a portal and Thanos was deposited on the other side of the Control Room.

Thanos attempted an attack again but Tony kept on repeating his trick, almost looking bored.

“I could do this all day,” said Tony, shrugging. He didn’t have his armour but he didn’t really need it. He figured if Thanos could breathe in space, he was probably impervious to other such injuries which would normally kill a human being.

“Hey, that’s my line!” retorted Steve, having been near enough to hear Tony’s words to the Titan, using his shield to attack two Chitauri leaping his way.

“It seemed adequate at the time,” replied Tony. He kept one eye on Thanos who was now watching him carefully. He raised his voice. He had an exit strategy. It was time to use it.

“Everyone, get back together! We’re getting out of here!”

They formed a circle in the centre of the Command Chamber. Both Wanda and Carol landed beside them as Steve, Bucky and Thor all pressed their backs together with Tony, Natasha Scott and Hope.

“I’m making a portal beneath our feet. We’ll be back on Earth by the Compound.”

“And Thanos?” glared Carol, her fists shining brightly.

“He won’t get through but he’ll follow. We cannot win this fight here. We need it on our terms. Not his,” answered Tony.
“He’s right,” added Natasha. She hadn’t been there at the final battle and she hated the thought of bringing the fight to Earth but it was their only option. But they’d have the world on their side this time. “Do it, Tony.”

“Stark!” Thanos began, racing forward, aware of what was about to happen, throwing his double-bladed sword directly at Tony.

The portal opened up beneath their feet and everyone fell through, falling sideways onto the grass of the Avengers Compound.

Tony was the last to fall through, just as the double-bladed sword flew over his head, missing him by millimetres as he waved goodbye to Thanos.

Tumbling out onto the grass and getting to his feet straight away, Tony glanced up at the sky.
“Right. Now we’ve done it.” He turned back to the others. “He’s coming. We haven’t got long to prepare before this place becomes a battleground.”

The Battle for Earth was coming.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

In the comics, Thanos can breathe in space... It's not addressed in the MCU if he can or not but I decided to lift that from the comics, so Tony sending Thanos out into space wouldn't kill him so there is no point in him attempting to do that.

Essentially Ant-Man and the Wasp were able to disable the machine used to extract the Stones from Tony and rig it to explode, thereby ruining Thanos' plan. He won't be happy. And he is coming to Earth.

The next chapter is entitled: ”The Battle of the Compound". This chapter will be posted on Sunday 12th April.

Until then, please stay safe everyone!

the-writer1988
The Battle for Earth commences...

Chapter Notes

Hello!

Happy Easter everyone! I hope you are all staying safe. I actually didn't think I'd get this chapter done today but I have! I hope it meets your expectations!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Two

Battle For Earth

Thursday 9th August 2018

The last twenty-four hours had been a whirlwind of events gradually spiralling out of control at unprecedented speeds. They were now at the cusp of what Tony felt would be the final battle. This was everything he had been building towards ever since he had woken up here two years ago.

They called everyone out from the Compound, moving away from it in case Thanos decided to strike and destroy it, just like he had done so before. The chances were high he would, but it was likely he knew they had vacated the building so destroying it wouldn’t really hurt the Avengers. They’d vacated all the equipment they needed, including two Hulkbuster suits that Tony had designed for Bruce and Vision to use if they wished to.

Pepper approached him cautiously, holding out another Arc Reactor for him. His previous had been removed by Thanos. “I’m glad you’re safe,” she said.

He took the Arc Reactor and attached it to the front of his clothes, taping it close to his chest. “You shouldn’t be here.” He reached out and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Pep, I can’t lose you, you have to –”

Pepper shook her head, her gaze hardening, anticipating Tony’s order. “No. I’m not leaving. Not ever. I can fight.”

Tony groaned. He had expected this. “Pep. He’ll come after you. This whole place is going to become a battlefield any minute now! I won’t be able to protect you!”

“I can hold my own, Tony. I have my own suit. I’m staying to fight.” Pepper was adamant.

He knew that look could see whatever he said wouldn’t change her mind. He could knock her out
and take her as far away as he possibly could but he couldn’t do that to her. “I can’t lose you,” he whispered again. “If Thanos targets you… Pep… the future…” If Pepper died, Morgan would not be born.

Her lips twitched. She squeezed his hands. “Tony, I know you care and you love me. I can’t stay on the side-lines, not this time. I’ll be careful, I promise.” She leaned in and kissed him on the lips. “I love you. Before you came back in time, I lost you. This time we are both going to come out of this. I know we will.”

He didn’t want her to put herself in danger and Pepper was willing to stay on and fight, despite the danger she was putting herself in. Thanos would strike her down if he had the chance too. He wanted to prevent Tony from getting the happy ending that he wanted. He felt uneasy but Pepper was single-minded. She was stubborn, a strong woman who knew what she wanted and could not be deterred from.

“Stay safe, Pep…” He leaned in and kissed her passionately on the lips, resting his head against hers. He could quite easily portal her to another place and leave her behind, just to keep her safe… I cannot do it to her.

“And you too.”

“Avoid Thanos. Keep to the air if you can,” instructed Tony, just wanting to keep her safe even within the battle.

“Tony…” Pepper began, eyeing him, though with a hint of a smile cracking her lips.

There was a shuffling noise from behind them. They’d taken a bit of privacy from the others, using the advantage of the treeline to have a short bit of time together.

Tony glanced up at the tree they stood underneath, the shades of its leaves offering protection from the dim dawn of the summer sun. They’d arrived back at the Compound from Thanos’ ship shortly after midnight, and dawn had fast approached. They hadn’t had much time to prepare. He was sure the Battle would soon commence.

“I know you are there, kid,” said Tony. “Come on out.”

“How did you know?” Peter swung out of the tree, landing on his feet with ease. “I’m usually very quiet.”

“You were,” replied Tony. “But, you forget, I have powers now. My natural senses have been enhanced.”

Peter pouted.

“And you probably won’t be able to hide anything from me either.” Tony grinned.

“Oh, man…” Peter sighed.

“What’s up?” asked Tony, sensing a reason why Peter had hidden from them. “Aunt May not wanting you to help?”

Peter shook his head. “She’s not.”

“You should listen to her,” replied Tony.
“But I want to help!”

“Peter…” Tony sighed. He could understand the kid’s desire to help but if this battle was going to go the way it had before when Tony had died… He couldn’t risk the kid. “I’m not talking to her for you. The battle we are about to head into… It’s…” He couldn’t even describe it. “It’s not a place for you. You have to go home and stay safe with your Aunt.”

Peter looked ready to argue.

“Kid, I could open up a portal and send you both to the other side of the planet to keep you safe. I do not want to do that to the people I care about but if it keeps you away from this, then I will.” Tony folded his arms across his chest, staring Peter down.

The kid’s shoulders slumped. “What if we lose? What then?”

“We won’t.” He didn’t know it for certain, it was just a feeling he had. “Now, please, Peter, before Thanos attacks, get yourself and your Aunt out of here.”

Reluctantly the kid nodded, turned and started to walk away, then stopped and looked back. “Please come back alive, Mr Stark, we still need to finish our super, secret project.”

Tony laughed. “That we do.” He watched as Peter made his way back over to the other group of Avengers, losing sight of Peter as he walked through the treeline that he and Pepper were using for a bit of private time.

“He won’t leave,” said Pepper quietly.

Tony sighed. “I know. I’m giving him the benefit of doubt in the hope he proves me wrong.” He took hold of her hand. “Come on, we should get back.” He led her back towards the others.

They stood overlooking the Compound in the valley before them. An ominous shadow overcast them as Thanos’ ship began to descend through the atmosphere.

“You know,” suggested Carol, her fists glowing, “I could tear his ship to shreds. He’d probably survive it and some of his army…”

Tony had considered that option. “But his army could be greatly reduced…” The battle facing them would not be so bad if Thanos’ forces suffered a devastating loss of life. On hindsight they probably should have had Carol do this when they had been rescued, there would have been less chance of survival in that case. They simply hadn’t thought of it at the time.

“If Danvers can bring down his ship, I see no reason why it isn’t something we shouldn’t do,” said Gamora, glancing up at the ship that had once been her home. “It gives us an advantage.”

“And potentially saves the Compound from destruction,” pointed out Steve.

Tony nodded and traded a glance with Natasha. She was on the same lines as him. “Ok. Danvers, the ship is all yours.”

Carol shot up into the sky.

Tony lost sight of her. Everyone was assembling. Everything was about to start. He ran his fingers down his Arc Reactor, activating his armour. Pepper did the same, standing beside him as they all looked to the sky as explosions reverberated through the air.
“INCOMING!” Sam yelled, pointing upwards.

From high above they could see cannon fire from the ship, descending downwards heading straight for the Compound. Several flashes of light all at once streaked downwards, hitting its intended target and blowing the Compound to smithereens. The ground shook beneath their feet and Tony clenched his jaw. He saw Peter talking to Doctor Strange and – “Shit!” The kid would – He ran, aware of what Peter might try to do. “Strange, don’t listen to him!”

The wizard glanced up and Tony skidded to a halt. “Both of them?”

Tony nodded. “Yes. May and the kid.” He glared at Peter. “Don’t play games with me, kid. You were trying to stay, weren’t you?”

Peter cowered.

Tony shook his head. He didn’t want the kid anywhere near this battle. Yes, he’d been a great help before but he couldn’t risk the kid’s life. He had Pepper to worry for in his place. “Kid…”

“He should stay,” said May, her voice trembling, only slightly as the smell of burning shimmered in the air from the burning Compound. “Peter can help.”

“May, I want you both safe.”

“Peter will still come and help. You send him back, he’ll still try to make it back,” she explained.

“Not if we send you both to the other side of the planet,” explained Tony, aware that it wouldn’t be long before Thanos’ arrival, despite his ship being downed by Carol.

May shook her head. “No. If you do that, he will never forgive you. I do not want to lose him but I accepted Peter for who he is and what he does. You might need him. I’m letting him stay because it is the right thing to do.”

He couldn’t argue with May. She was Peter’s rightful guardian and if she was agreeing to Peter staying then there wasn’t anything Tony could do to push Peter away. “Ok. But, kid, promise me one thing.”

“Anything. Mr Stark.”

“Stay on the sidelines. I know you are capable but I cannot risk losing you. Hold on… I thought you didn’t have your suit?” Tony remembered. That had been the whole reason Peter had been captured. He hadn’t been near his Spider-Man suit when Thanos’ had invaded New York.

Peter winced and pointed to Strange. “He took me back so I could get it whilst the others were off rescuing you.”

Tony groaned. The kid really thought of everything. He rolled his eyes. “Fine.” He watched as May and Peter hugged and barely heard her discernible whisper of ‘be careful and come home’ before Strange conjured a portal right back to their apartment in Queens, and May stepped through, leaving the site. He pointed a finger at Peter. “I mean it. Stay on the sidelines.”

Above them Thanos’ ship was breaking up, still burning through the atmosphere, trailing thick smoke as it fell towards the ruins of the Compound.

Even as the ship fell, and Carol appeared out of the top, close to the command centre, attachments from the ship had already been falling and lodging themselves into the Earth around the destroyed
Compound, opening up and rows upon rows of Thanos’ army was marching out. Not only were there Chitauri part of the invading force, but there were also Outriders, Sakaarans and Chitauri Gorillas moving forward.

“This is it,” muttered Tony. They would travel down into the valley to face the army.

There was a flash of white light obscuring their vision before revealing Thanos with his Black Order and Leviathans having now joined the battlefield via teleport. Sanctuary II crashed behind them, sliding into the wreckage of the Compound and coming to a stop, meters away from the foundations of the lake, preventing catastrophic consequences if the water was let loose. Last time the foundations had been shattered and the river had flooded the valley. Doctor Strange had, had to hold the river back.

“He’s waiting for us,” said Natasha. “He knows where we are.”

“Have we got everyone we need for this?” asked Tony.

“We have.” Natasha swallowed. “This is what we’ve been working towards. This is the endgame right here.”

Tony pursed his lips but didn’t reply. Thick black smoke flittered across the field, darkening the sky above them. Resolve kicked in and he began the descent down into the valley, the others following behind him.

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They had a few extra allies, bought forth by T’Challa and Doctor Strange. The Dora Milaje and the Masters of the Mystic Arts had all joined the Avengers ranks, having arrived during the Avengers mission to retrieve Tony. Even the army was on standby but they hoped to avoid using them if they could get away with it.

Thanos’ forces were marshalling on the other side of the valley, marching forward to face the Avengers and their allies.

Lining up at the bottom of the valley, Tony took a step forward but then cast a glance over at Steve and motioned for him. “Cap. You’re better at motivational speeches then I am. It’s your turn.” He knew Steve wouldn’t wax lyrical now they were in this position.

Steve raised his shield, a solemn expression on his face as the Avengers, the Guardians of the Galaxy, the Dora Milaje and the Masters of the Mystic Arts lined up behind him, all with one specific purpose in mind.

His voice remained low but the words were simple.

“Avengers!” he bellowed loudly to attract their attention, and then lowered it again. “Assemble!”

And they charged towards the assembled army.

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They’d discussed tactics and formed teams together of who should fight together. One such team was Steve, Thor and Bucky – two super-soldier and the God of Thunder – were a lethal combination. They all knew to leave Thanos to Tony. By all accounts, none of them would be able to take the Titan down anyway and it would be a waste of their energy to even attempt it.
But all three threw themselves into battle, spraying mud and dirt everywhere as they fought towards the centre of Thanos’ forces.

Steve ducked, swung his shield, kicked out and defended himself against a barrage of assaults, taking down Chitauri and Sakaarans alike, whilst Thor swung Stormbreaker, sending Chitauri and Sakaarans through the air. Lightning struck down as he leapt around, sending swathes of energy across the battlefield. Bucky held an automated blaster, filled with multiple bullets and on his belt, he carried replacement packs. His aim was good and true as he took down each and every enemy that leapt his way, sometimes having to dodge to the side and kick and punch them before aligning their bodies with bullets.

Sweat adorned Steve’s face and he went flying as something hit him in the back. He rolled, clutching his shield to protect his body. He winced and climbed to his feet, looking over his shoulder and saw one of the Black Order, Cull Obsidian, swinging a chain-like hammer at Thor. The God of Thunder moved back, raised Stormbreaker and summoned lightning down upon their attacker.

The skin on Cull’s burnt flesh rapidly repaired.

Steve groaned. Trust Thanos’ minions to have enhanced healing abilities.

Cull roared in anger and frustration, swinging his hammer up in an upswing, narrowly catching Thor in the chin and sending the God backwards. Thor’s head smashed into a rock protruding from the ground. He went limp, his face and his eyes flickering as he fought to stave off the unconsciousness threatening him.

Steve saw Stormbreaker on the ground, watched as Cull advanced towards Thor and he made his choice. He dashed for Stormbreaker, lifted it with ease, and swung it right at Cull in a ferocious speed, bringing the weapon down upon the exposed neck of the alien and lodging the blade in. Cull died instantly, black, thick blood gushing from his neck as his head half hung off. His body fell to the side with a thud, taking Stormbreaker with it.

“That looks… nasty,” commented Bucky, stepping forward and swinging his gun around and letting off a shell of bullets towards incoming Chitauri.

Steve panted and knelt beside Thor who was just coming around.

“You… should… not have… been able to lift that,” Thor rambled.

Steve glanced at Stormbreaker, still lodged within Cull’s neck. He shrugged. “Guess I was worthy after all.”

“Always thought you would be. Stormbreaker has the same principles that Mjölnir did. Only those who are worthy can wield it…” Thor held up a hand and Steve pulled him to his feet.

“You alright?” Steve asked, concern in his voice.

“I’m fine.” Thor grabbed Stormbreaker’s handle and wrenched it from Cull’s neck. “Nice hit by the way.”

Steve grimaced, then twisted back, threw his Shield at the advancing alien attackers, taking them down one by one, his Shield homing back to his wrist. Quite useful in situations like this. “Part of the job, Thor. Come on, this is far from over!”
Across the field, Rhodey flew over the mass of enemies in War Machine, searching for spots he could attack without harming allies. It was a lot more difficult to select targets when the Dora Milaje and the Masters of the Mystic Arts had joined their side. Sam glided beside him. They were on air-strike duties, finding targets to take out to reduce the number of enemies.

Rhodey’s other mission was to keep an eye on Pepper who was across the field, circling herself and finding targets to destroy with her own nanonite technology. She was close to Thanos than Rhodey would have liked but at least she wasn’t on ground level with him. Pepper had also asked Rhodey to keep an eye out on the Spider-kid, who was, remarkably, staying away from the real centre of the fight, staying close to the edges of the battle as he could.

“There’s a free spot there,” Sam pointed out. “Three points to the left.”

Rhodey focused on the area Sam had detected and readied his missiles. “Got the bombs?”

“Ready to go.”

“Then let us do a run and a second sweep to clear the area.” Rhodey flew down, kicking his thrusters into gear so he could fly over the intended area quickly, letting loose his missiles as he tracked over. Dirt and bodies of Chitauri sprung into the air from the bombing as Sam dropped his own from his harness, before using his two hand-gun blasters to fly lower into the field and take down more, before sweeping back up to join Rhodey higher in the sky.

The area was clear, dead bodies covering the area but the only casualties were to Thanos’ forces. Little by little they were clearing the area.

“Er… Rhodey… we may have a problem.” Sam’s voice panicked over the comm-unit.

“What is it?” Rhodey swung about. He couldn’t see what had alarmed Sam.

But one simple word sent his heart into overdrive.

Sam’s voice was quiet. “Pepper.”

- - - - -

Clint ran through the field, his arrows strapped to his back and his bow out. He probably wasn’t the best fighter to be out here since he had a specific skill set and aliens and arrows didn’t really mix. Outriders and Chitauri were the only ones he could kill when given the chance to attack them. He needed an outcropping to operate from but there wasn’t one he could reach within distance. He just had to run and attack when he had the opportunity to do so.

At least he had fast reflexes.

“Clint!”

He didn’t stop running but glanced to his right and saw T’Challa running parallel to him in his Black Panther suit.

“What?” Clint ducked, twisted and stabbed a Chitauri with one of his arrows as he ran past.

“I can get you to an outcropping!” T’Challa pointed towards a section of rubble that was on the very edge of the battle. It was close to where Bruce and Vision were in the Hulkbuster suits. “They’ll be able to protect you.”
“I don’t need protecting!” shouted Clint as he leapt over a dead body, twisting in mid-air to fire off three arrows at a pack of Outriders who were pursuing them. His arrows buried in their skulls and three fell to the ground dead, but it didn’t stop the others from continuing their pursuit of him.

The Black Panther somersaulted, slashing at the throats of four Chitauri warriors before landing deftly on his feet and continuing to follow Clint’s path. “Not to protect you! You’ll be more useful in one place!”

Clint could see the reasoning and it was a good idea. Bruce and Vision were mainly keeping to the edge of the field because they hadn’t had much training on the two Hulkbusters before having to use them in combat. They’d be able to fend off any incoming attackers from Clint if he was stationed in one place.

“Ok, fair point,” he conceded. “Get me there!” He wouldn’t be able to make it there himself, not with a hoard of Thanos’ forces for him to get through.

Ducking and then sliding underneath one of the Chitauri Gorillas that leapt in his path, Clint sped faster, twisting and zig-zagging across the field as T’Challa attempted to clear a path for him.

About ten Chitauri all came for him at once and Clint tried to avoid them. T’Challa rushed to his aid but Bruce in the Hulkbuster reached them first, firing at them giving Clint the time he needed to duck behind the line and scramble up the rubble to a higher point. He found a piece he could hide behind and mounted an arrow on his bow, before twisting and kneeling and carefully looking over to aim.

Perfect position. He could target anything and the two Hulkbusters provided sufficient protection to him unless he was targeted from above, but it was a start, and now he could pick his targets carefully. Spotting his next target, his primed an arrow and fired.

---

Gamora lifted her sword facing down Proxima Midnight, her sister in name but not in blood.

“If it isn’t the traitor!” hissed Proxima. “He wanted to give you everything and you threw it all away… for that human!”

“Peter Quill isn’t an ordinary human,” stated Gamora. Quill was elsewhere on the battlefield with the rest of the Guardians, taking down troops of Thanos’ army. Gamora had been hunting for her siblings. If anyone could take them down, she could. “Thanos took me from my home, killed the only family I had. How could he ever be a father to me when he destroyed everything I ever had? Peter gave me a sense of purpose. A sense to be something better than I was. What he did to Nebula for years… That wasn’t love…”

“He was trying to better us all!” spat Proxima.

Gamora shook her head. “No. He should have played to our strengths, not forced hatred between us. I haven’t seen Nebula in months.”

Proxima’s mouth opened in a wide smile. “She tried to kill Thanos. We killed her.”

“No. She can’t be…” Gamora felt like ice had just been thrown over her and a dark hole had opened up in the pit of her stomach. But Nebula’s silence had been concerning. They’d been getting on in better terms now.

“She betrayed us. Death was the only option for her,” sneered Proxima.
“I don’t believe it!” snarled Gamora angrily, her hair whipping past her face.

Proxima’s red eyes shined and she charged with the spear and Gamora leapt forward, clashing her sword against her sister’s spear.

It would be a battle to the death.

- - - - -

Scott stood on Natasha’s shoulder as she used her batons to wade her way through the throng of aliens, sliding on the floor and whipping around in a frenzy. She still wore the Iron Man armour but had chosen to fight on the ground. Hope flew beside her, in small size, before appearing as normal to surprise the enemy, giving Natasha a chance to take them down.

Scott was looking for targets. He could see the Spider-Man kid swinging this way and that way close to the edge of the battlefield. He didn’t seem like he needed any help. He was quite an able fighter. The Dora Milaje and the Masters of the Mystic Arts were coping quite well with keeping the majority of the forces at bay, giving the Avengers closest to the centre of the fray more of a chance to make headway through their opponents.

Natasha twisted, hitting them with her batons hard, her hair whipping around her. She could see Tony up ahead, battling his way towards Thanos, who kept retreating away from Tony whenever he got close. Thanos was up to something.

Tony wasn’t using his powers either, choosing to fight with just his suit. Probably a wise move at this point but Thanos was up to something. She could feel it. Why else was he trying to avoid facing Tony at the moment?

_Probably knows he stands no chance against Tony._

She gritted her teeth and was about to swing away in another direction when she saw it.

Thanos was moving, his double-edged sword clutched tightly in his hand. He was rushing towards one specific spot on the battlefield, right where Pepper Potts had just landed after being hit out of the sky by the tail of a Leviathan.

Natasha activated her thrusters. “Hold on, Scott!”

And she prayed she would not be too late.

- - - - -

They were an effective team together. Doctor Strange, Wanda and Carol worked seamlessly, giving one another targets, staying together in a concentrated effort to make some dent in Thanos’ forces.

While Doctor Strange opened up portals to send their attackers to other ends of the battlefield or even in front of Carol and Wanda to deal with, Carol’s line of flight took her around their area where she could dispose of attackers just by going at high speed. Wanda used her own powers to wrench and crush apart as many enemies as possible.

Both Carol and Wanda had wanted to help Tony against Thanos but he’d refused, saying this was about him and the Titan and no one else. Judging by the Titan’s actions so far, he was aiming for Tony too, ignoring everyone else.

Carol continued to fly through the air and Strange dropped a line of Chitauri in her path, just as
Wanda used her powers to drag other warriors to her, and flinging them all over the battlefield.

Out of all the Avengers on the field, the three of them were doing the most damage.

But the ground rocked beneath them, causing Wanda to lose her balance and Strange to stumble back.

Wanda wiped the hair out of her face. “What was that?”

And that was when they saw it.

A colourful blend of colours right in the centre of the field, glowing brightly and a yell of utter anguish magnifying across the battlefield.

Tony Stark, sans armour, attacked Thanos.

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Tony was too far away, engulfed in a battle with over a dozen Chitauri and Sakaarans as Thanos made a beeline for Pepper. They were grabbing hold of him, trying to stab him with their weapons. He twisted, lashing out and his lasers went round in a tight circle, killing a few before he was able to activate his repulsors and flew out of the tight circle that had been forming around him, shooting off towards Pepper.

Thanos was already there, right by Pepper’s prone body. She’d been knocked out the sky, half her armour had been torn from her, leaving the lower half of her body defenceless.

*No! No! NO!*

He couldn’t fire any weapons at Thanos in case he harmed Pepper and he dared not use his powers as he could feel himself losing control. The fact he could hurt her either way…

Thanos had Pepper by the throat, her helmet having deactivated after she had hit the ground.

“THANOS!” Tony yelled, pushing his thrusters fast, but something came at him from the ground. Another of Thanos’ children, Corvus Glaive, threw himself in Tony’s path, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Scrambling to his feet as quickly as possible, Tony shot Corvus directly in the face, only to turn and see Thanos stab Pepper right in the stomach with his sword, pull it out of her, only to repeat the same action and stabbing her again, twisting the sword inside of her, before removing it and dropping her to the ground.

“NO!” Tony’s widened. This could not… Could not…

Everything else seemed to dim around him. His thoughts were only on Pepper. He flew towards her, landed and retracted his helmet. He didn’t care he was in the middle of a battle. Didn’t care his enemy stood watching smugly from the side, probably signalling to his forces not to attack. Didn’t care that he had left himself vulnerable. The only thing that mattered to him was Pepper.

Pepper was on her back, barely breathing. Blood dripped out of the side of her mouth and her stomach was covered in blood, still leaking out. Her hair was loose but it was clear she was just moments from death.

“No… no… Pep… Pepper, please…” Tony stroked the hair out of her eyes. “No…”
“To…ny…” Pepper’s voice was weak, her breathing hoarse.

“Shh…. You’ll be alright…” He couldn’t lose her. Just couldn’t.

“…No…” she gurgled, blood dripping out of her mouth.

Tears shimmed in Tony’s eyes. There was nothing he could do. Pepper’s wounds were too extensive. The two sword strikes had gone right through her. The amount of blood soaking her body was already an indication of how serious her injuries were, and how fatal they would be. He slipped an arm underneath her and lifted her up, her arms limp at her sides. He held her tight.

“Please don’t…” he begged.

“I’m….. so….ry…” Pepper’s voice faded, her last words hardly comprehensible.

And Pepper Potts breathed her last.

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

*looks at the cliffhanger* Please don't hate me! This has been planned for a long while. If you do not like the ending of this chapter, I can guarantee it will be worth your time to continue reading this story. Please, trust me.

It was quite fun to pair different Avengers together. And Nebula... she was supposed to
turn up in this story but could not find a place for her, so, unfortunately, she got killed off-screen as she still attempted to kill Thanos. Unfortunately, they killed her after that.

Many thanks to my fabulous artist, JediPanda22, for another fantastic piece of art depicting the cliffhanger of this chapter!

The next few chapters may be quite short and there is potential I might be able to update quicker from now on, but it will have to see how much I write this week.

The next update will be on Sunday 19th April 2020...

Stay safe everyone!

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirty-Three: Tony Unleashed

Chapter Summary

The battle continues...

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not updating yesterday, I wasn't too happy with this chapter so was still making edits until today!

The next few chapters will be shorter than normal as we come close to the end of the story...

I hope everyone is staying safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Three

Tony Unleashed

Thursday 9th August 2018

He felt numb.

Pepper, limp in his arms… gone. She was dead.

No Pepper… No Morgan…

He felt the tears mingling in his eyes. At this moment he didn’t care what happened. Everything he had been fighting for was gone. The woman he loved was dead. His whole universe gone in a second. He knew he should have gone against his instincts and ensured she was safe, prevented her from fighting.

He knew there was a battle going on around him, but nothing mattered anymore. A part of him wondered why he wasn’t being struck down. The reasonable part of his brain assumed Thanos was ensuring Tony could be here like this, so he could saviour the pain Tony was feeling, and how he had won against his foe.

Someone skidded to a halt next to him, kneeling down beside him. “Tony?”

Natasha’s voice was quiet, sad but steady.

He didn’t look at her. He couldn’t. He hugged Pepper’s body closer to him.

“Tony… I’m sorry… but you have to get up.” Natasha continued gently in his ear. “Pepper would want you to win.”
“You don’t know what she would want,” said Tony, “she’s dead!” He glared at her angrily, tears trailing down his cheeks.

“Then Thanos wins,” replied Natasha quietly. “Don’t let her death be in vain. We were sent back for a reason. We have to see it through.”

Her words were harsh but it was the truth he needed to hear.

Tony swallowed the lump in his throat, gently laying Pepper down on the ground, placing her arms on her chest, and kissing the top of her forehead. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.” Getting to his feet, Tony turned to face Thanos.

He and Natasha were encircled by Thanos’ army, all held at bay by the Titan, waiting for his command to attack. All around them, the battle continued but they were in their own little bubble, protected and safe for the time being.

“You had to take her from me, didn’t you?” Tony asked, his voice breaking. He didn’t care if it made him seem weak asking this. Thanos had taken everything from him. Was there any point now in continuing on this path? A part of him wanted to give up now. In what universe did Tony Stark ever get to enjoy his victory? It appeared the universe was working against him. “Everything I ever wanted, gone, because of you.”

The anger was building in his chest and the hatred for the Titan standing in front of him was hitting its peak.

No matter how he felt any victory would be worthless, he couldn’t stand by and let Thanos get away with callously murdering Pepper without facing the consequences himself.

“I seek to improve the universe,” stated Thanos, “make it a better place for those that deserve to live within it.”

“And Pepper wasn’t one of those who deserved to live?” Tony’s fists clenched. It was building within him, his power, wanting to be let loose.

“By extension of being one you care for? No, she did not,” replied Thanos. “She may have been of some use in my new universe, and I can still have her around. Remaking the universe is what is required if balance is to be found. The deaths here are unimportant, for they can live again in my new world. But you will not be one of those who do.”

“There will always be people who rise up against an oppressor,” snarled Tony.

“Then they will all die. With the power of the universe at my disposal I can do whatever I want,” explained Thanos.

“This is where you are naïve, Thanos,” began Tony. “I’m the one with the power of the universe at my disposal, not you. Your fancy machine is destroyed. You cannot harness them from me.”

A little smirk spread on Thanos’ face. “Maybe not now but that power is still within my grasp. Destroying you will release it all.”

Tony’s face twitched. “If you believe it is that simple, fight me and me alone. Stop this battle before any more needless lives are lost!”

“No.”
Anger coursed through Tony and he could feel the pressure building in his chest, forcing him to nearly lose control but a hand on his arm brought him back to reality.


“Pepper is dead!” he hissed sharply in response. “Nothing matters anymore!”

Tony tugged free of her grip, glanced back at Pepper’s dead body. “Protect her for me. She doesn’t deserve to be more marred than she already is.”

“I’m not letting you-” Natasha began but stopped as Tony pointed a hand at her and Pepper’s body, formed a portal beneath their feet and promptly sent them to the other side of the battlefield, leaving Tony to face Thanos on his own.

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“Dammit!” Natasha spat, scrambling to her feet. Tony was going to lose control; she could feel it. Pepper’s death was driving him over the edge. She crawled over to Pepper’s body. She looked peaceful, sleeping quietly. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.” She shook her head. “This cannot be what the universe intended for you and Tony…”

*It’s not.*

Souls’ voice in her mind interrupted her words.

“What?” she gasped.

*But it had to happen.*

“Why?” Natasha croaked out.

There was no answer.

Suddenly there was a whoosh next to her and Scott appeared.

“What the-” She stumbled back, surprised by his sudden appearance.

“Erm… I was on your shoulder. You told me to hang on.”

She nodded, remembering. In the aftermath of what had happened, she had completely forgotten about her passenger. “Sorry. It’s…”

“Unfortunate?” guessed Scott.

Natasha nodded, her eyes never leaving Pepper’s body. “They deserved better.” She glanced over at the battlefield. “I need to get back to Tony… Can you-?”

Scott cut her off. “Protect Pepper? Sure. Hope’s on her way. We’ll keep her safe.”

Natasha gently smiled. “Thanks. I just hope we haven’t lost this battle yet.”

Kicking her thrusters into gear, Natasha headed back towards the centre of the battle, aware that Pepper’s death had changed everything. Tony was on the path of loss rather than one of victory. And she had to make sure he won, no matter what the consequences were.
“Smart move, Stark,” smirked Thanos as he circled his foe. Pepper’s blood still stained Thanos’ sword. The sight of it only made Tony angrier.

Tony bought his hand up to his Arc Reactor, tapped it and the armour started to retract into the Reactor. He pulled the Arc Reactor from his jumpsuit and dropped it to the ground. “I don’t need my armour to face you.”

“That armour was not enough to protect your wife,” said Thanos darkly. “It wouldn’t have been enough to take me down even if you were without your enhanced powers.”

“That’s why I’ve removed it. Gives me more freedom.” Tony reached downward, to the little part inside him that he could control. His whole body flared with light as he glowed with the power of the Infinity Stones.

“You are not invincible, Stark.” Thanos moved his sword into position, moving his feet apart.

“I never thought I was.”

“When I have your power, your daughter will be created. I will make sure she suffers.”

Tony snarled. “You will leave her out of this!”

Thanos stepped forward. “No.”

Tony’s face contorted into a fit of rage, clenching his fists angrily and yelling at the top of his voice, filled with anguish. “THANOS!” It was a yell that magnified across the battlefield.

And Tony Stark attacked Thanos.

---

Natasha engaged her thrusters, calling over her com-unit. “Everyone! Stay away from Tony and Thanos! Try to take the fight away from the centre!”

Steve replied almost instantly. “What happened?”

Natasha swallowed hard. Not everyone would know Pepper was dead. There was no time to waste. They had to know and she was on open comms, so everyone would hear. “Thanos killed Pepper. She’s dead. Tony… saw.”

“Oh god…” Steve gasped. “I can – Woah!” She heard clashing over the comm line, presuming Steve was clashing in battle.

“Steve, concentrate on the battle!”

A new voice came over the line. “Stark’s losing it, isn’t he?” Wanda’s voice was quiet.

A slight bite of her lip. “Yes.” Natasha couldn’t hide it from the others. “I’m the only one who can get through to him.” She twirled in the air, using her suit weapons to take out a line of Chitauri. She flew up straight to avoid a Leviathan which was careening down towards her, then rolled to the side in her flight.

*You need to get to Tony now!*

Soul’s voice was back again.
“Trying!” grated Natasha. She kicked her thrusters out again, twisting in mid-air, speeding back towards where Tony was. But as her eyes fell on him, she saw the danger they were all in. “What will happen if I cannot stop him?”

The voice was quiet. *He will become like Thanos. He cannot unleash us in anger. Everything will be for nought.*

“There why let Pepper die?” argued Natasha, swooping downwards, rolling out the way of another Leviathan. “If you didn’t want Tony to lose control, then why not protect her? He could have saved her!”

*He still can.*

Natasha gasped. “What do you mean?” she demanded.

The voice did not reply.

As she flew overhead, descending down towards Tony, she saw him raise his right arm, his fingers held up in the click position. His whole body was glowing brightly, much lighter than she had ever seen before. She knew if she didn’t stop him, everything they had done would be for nothing.

Heart pounding in her chest, Natasha reached out desperately. “Tony! No! Don’t!”

---

Thanos swung.

Tony ducked, sliding underneath Thanos’ sword, twisting around and firing off two energy beams from his hands, unleashing the Power Stone right at the Titan, slightly unbalancing him as he attempted to fend off the attacks. Immediately, Tony portalled to the other side of Thanos, surprising the Titan as he tried to twist and turn to face his foe.

His whole body was glowing brightly, his chest burning in anger and in pain, as he continued to let loose his power recklessly, constantly hitting Thanos with barrages of energy.

Tony snarled in anger as his attacks became fiercer and cuts began to appear on Thanos’ skin. Not enough to kill but damage which bolstered his confidence that if he kept this up his attacks would eventually contribute significant damage to Thanos.

Thanos’ face contorted in anger as he swung his sword in all directions in a desperate attempt to hit Tony.

But Tony was fast.

He vanished through a portal, only to appear behind the Titan, attack him and then repeat the same procedure, forcing his enemy to rely on his quick reflexes to avoid being seriously injured. The warriors of his army who had surrounded Tony and whom Thanos had kept at bay had begun to surge forward, in an attempt to aid Thanos, however, Tony was out of control.

Tony didn’t care how he unleashed his powers. He was just acting out every second, letting the surge of power consume him. He could feel his body burning, even as he moved from one place to another, continuing to throw energy beams in every direction, sometimes at the warriors attacking him or at Thanos himself.

The Titan was getting desperate, making more mistakes as he continually failed to injure Tony.
Fear was building upon his face and he was forever glancing around, checking for Tony’s whereabouts, always one step behind Tony’s attacks.

“Let’s see how you like this!” Tony yelled, spreading his arms wide, a burst of power leaking out to consume Thanos, red energy changing the scenery around the Titan, taking him away from the reality he was in. He kept Thanos in the dark, blinding him, forcing Thanos to see things that were not there.

A cruel smile danced across Tony’s face as he revelled in the full power granted to him by his absorption of the Stones.

With the ability to change the environment around him, Tony could alter Thanos’ perception of the world, make him believe what he was seeing was real.

“What are you doing?” Thanos bellowed, a hint of fear evident in his voice.

“I’m making you regret ever killing Pepper!” snarled Tony. He clenched his fists and lifted the darkness blinding the Titan revealing a battlefield strewn with the bodies of Thanos’ forces.

And right in the centre, Tony formed the image of himself, standing there with a long sword formed from his suit and he held Thanos’ favourite daughter by the throat, before plunging the sword into her abdomen, striking her down in a single blow. He repeated the sequence, again and again, taking Gamora’s life, forcing Thanos to see.

“STOP!” Thanos rushed towards the image of Tony, swung at him and Tony and the dead Gamora vanished in a whirl of colours. “This is not REAL!” Clasping his sword in his hand, Thanos began to swing it around the area, even as Tony danced from place to place, dropping an image of Gamora’s bloodied body at Thanos’ feet.

And then Tony appeared behind Thanos, holding his hands behind his back, swinging back on his feet. “Now you know what it feels like to see a loved one die!” he hissed angrily.

“I know this is not real, Stark. Gamora is alive!” Thanos snarled.

“And yet you still killed her from where I come from,” stated Tony quietly. He held up his hand and removed the veil covering Thanos’ eyes.

They were back on the battlefield, Thanos’ forces were being overrun. Bit by bit his army was being defeated.

Tony’s body glowed brighter as he approached Thanos. “I can feel the universe at my fingertips. It is all within reach. You have taken the woman I love away from me! And the child I want so badly!” His anger intensified. “I could do it; you know. Destroy everything in a single second. End life as we know it. Remake it how I want it to be. Every single Infinity Stone is within my power. I could do whatever I like with it. No one can stop me.”

The power coursing through him intensified. He felt like he was on fire, barely breathing through the power radiating through his body. He could feel the power within him trying to resist his calls. He could end this for good. He could avenge Pepper and Morgan. The moment he did so he’d become a god.

“It would be so easy to lose control and let the power overtake me…” whispered Tony, two tears trailing down his cheeks. “Let it overwhelm me… What’s the point in trying to control this power when I can allow it to consume me instead?”
“You know you want to do it, Stark! Lose control!” Thanos taunted. It was clear the Titan knew he had lost, there was no hope for victory for him unless he could push Tony to become overwhelmed by the power coursing through him.

Tony’s eyes burned. “I’ve already lost control.” He grinned mirthlessly, not caring anymore.

“If I cannot have the universe, then you may as well destroy it for me.” Thanos’ lips turned upwards. “Snap your fingers and end it all!”

Everything around Tony engulfed him. He could see the stars from the start of the universe to the end of it. He could feel the heartbeat of everyone on the battlefield, sense the beginning of new life and the end of an old life all across the universe. He could feel the universe coursing through him and he knew he had the power to do what Thanos could not, even if it was not the will of the Infinity Stones.

He could change the world.

He could change everything.

He raised his right hand, placing his middle finger on his thumb, ready to snap, ready to remake the universe a better place.

Tony’s lips twitched upwards. “Maybe… I will…”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Tony snapping his fingers isn't a good thing. Tony has allowed his grief to overwhelm him. I also thought it would be quite poetic for Tony to force Thanos to see, using the Reality Stone, Tony killing Gamora, in revenge for him having killed Pepper. However, this is just an illusion so Gamora is still alive.

The next chapter will be posted on Sunday 26th April!

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirty-Four: The Anchor

Chapter Summary

The end of the battle.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments so far! I can hardly believe we are just 5 chapters away from the end of the story. I hope you all enjoy this chapter... Shorter than normal but it was always intended to be.

I also decided to insert the illustration, JediPanda22, did for this chapter into the text of the story. I just felt it worked at that point rather than leaving it to the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Anchor

Thursday 9th August 2018

“Tony! No! Don’t!”

Natasha landed on her feet, determination across her face as she focused her gaze completely upon Tony. She’d landed between Tony and Thanos, her back to the Titan, knowing how dangerous her position was, realising it was the only option she had if she stood any chance of getting through to Tony.

She stretched out her hand to him. “Don’t do this.”

Tony tilted his head to the side. “Why not? Pepper is dead. There is nothing left for me…”

“There is always something left!” she retorted, beseeching him through not only her words but her eyes as well. “Tony, we have the power of the universe within us! We have the potential to do anything we want! Please, don’t take the easy way out! Don’t throw away everything we’ve fought to achieve!”

“Pepper is dead,” Tony said again, his words little more than a whisper.

“There is always a way,” Natasha replied quietly.

“I can’t live without her,” continued Tony. “She and Morgan…”

“You can still have them, Stark,” interrupted Thanos. “All you have to do is remake the universe.”
“Don’t listen to him!” Natasha kept her hand out towards Tony. “You’ll be falling into his trap! He wants the universe remade! He doesn’t care if he lives or dies because he knows if he goads you into doing this, Thanos will have won!”

“He’ll have never existed,” reasoned Tony. “He can’t win.”

Natasha swallowed. Everything hinged upon her next words. Tony was hesitating. If he wasn’t, he’d have snapped by now.

“Tony. It doesn’t matter if you make sure he doesn’t exist. We were not sent back to remake the universe. We were sent back to save it.”

“Maybe this is the way to save it,” said Tony. He raised his arm.

Natasha saw Thanos smiling. If Tony did this, Thanos would win. The universe could not be saved this way. “If you do this, Tony, I’ll stop you.”

The glow around Tony brightened as if he felt threatened by her remarks. She had designed her words to be taken as such. “You can’t.”

“We have a link,” she spoke coolly. “I can break the links I made to release your powers. Don’t think I won’t do it, Tony, when you put everything we’ve built at risk. You can only control your powers because of me. I can take that control away from you in an instant.”

Tony’s arm lowered slightly. “Nat… I need Pepper and Morgan… This is the only way…” His voice was broken, filled with sadness.

Nat shook her head. “It isn’t. Trust me. If you value our friendship, then trust me!”

“Don’t listen to her, Stark.” Thanos stepped forward. “You could become something more, something great in this new universe. You can have whatever you want if you just ended it right now. No one could stop you. You could be hailed as a hero by billions.”

Gritting her teeth, Natasha ignored Thanos’ words, choosing to focus upon Tony. “If you really wanted to do what he said, you wouldn’t be hesitating.” She took the risk Tony wouldn’t suddenly follow through.

The wind buffeted her hair and around them, the battle continued but they seemed outside of it, away from the calamity of the battle, as if the enemy was unable to break through the power Tony was exhibiting.

“Tony,” she tried again, desperate to reach him, “would Pepper really want this? Would she want to exist in a universe you have created just so you can be with her?”

“She wouldn’t know the truth,” stated Tony.

“But would you be happy?” Natasha stared into his eyes.

Tony’s shoulders sagged. “No.”

“Then don’t do it. Save the universe with me. Or destroy it without me.”

It was the ultimatum Tony had to choose between. One universe where he controlled everything, or the one they had already built together.

Nat pressed on. “We can do this together.” Take my hand, she mentally projected, hoping he would
hear her through the bond that resonated between them. “It’s not too late to save her.”

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The roar of the universe cascaded around him. He was engulfed in the mastery of the universe, his connection to it through the Infinity Stones showed him the possibilities of what he could do, what he could become. He could remake the universe, ensure Thanos was never a threat again. He could fix everything that was wrong with the universe with just a snap of his fingers.

But it would throw everything away that he and Natasha had been working for.

The battle continued behind them, but Tony’s power kept them protected. An invisible bubble encased them, no one would be able to reach or hear them as they stood at the epicentre of the climactic storm surrounding them. Thanos knew he had lost, but he would still win.

Natasha was right.

If Tony continued down the path he was on, he wouldn’t be a hero. He’d be a villain, no better than Thanos himself.

Pepper’s face swam in front of him. He could see her, her shining eyes and beautiful lips, and knew what she would be saying to him now if she was still here. She wouldn’t want him to do this. There was no reason for Tony to continue down this path. The Pepper he would create wouldn’t be the same he fell in love with.

Morgan’s adorable face appeared in his mind's eye. She was so like him. So curious and inquisitive. She’d loved him three thousand. More than anything he wanted his little girl.

*If I continue down this path, Morgan will not be who I remember her to be. She’ll be different.*

His heart pumped faster in his chest.

*I can’t do this.*

He blinked and he saw the swirling colours in front of him, his whole body glowing with energy and his right hand held up, ready to snap his fingers. He could feel the power coursing through him, and in front of him stood Thanos, the Titan’s expression changing from one of victory to one of anger, as if he had already realised what Tony’s choice would be.

Natasha’s hand was still stretched out towards him. “We can do this together.”

*Take my hand.*

He heard her voice over their bond resonating deeply within his soul.

“It’s not too late to save her.”

And, Tony knew Natasha was *right.*

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Tony grabbed her hand with his left one, lowering his right one down to his side. As their hands touched, an orange glow emanated around Natasha, linking them together as their bond opened up before them. The power was shared between them, though Natasha could still feel that Tony held the majority of the power flowing within them both.
Thanos’ expression was one of shock and horror. “How? How is this possible?” he demanded, raising his sword again.

Natasha’s lips turned upwards. But when she spoke it was not with her voice. Soul was speaking through her.

“You sought to unbalance the universe by wiping out half and then deciding to remake it in your own image. I and my siblings judged you unworthy to hold our power and gave the greatest hero the tools he needed to prevent the future he came from, from ever happening. Tony Stark defeated you before and died to save the universe. He will beat you again.”

Thanos growled angrily. “I am far more worthy than either of them!”

“Did you not hear? We judged you unworthy.” Soul repeated. “We interfered with the universe but we cannot do it ourselves without someone channelling our power. Tony Stark was worthy. We gave him the tools he needed to wield us. Natasha Romanoff died for the Soul Stone twice. She is worthy. She released Tony from the chains that bound his power. She is the anchor to Stark’s power. She can bring him back from the power raging through him, prevent him from making the same mistakes you did. Without Natasha Romanoff, this would not be happening.”

Thanos planted his feet apart, ready to attack.

“You did us a favour, Thanos. Murdering Pepper Stark was the greatest mistake you ever made!”

Thanos’ lips thinned. “No. My greatest mistake was not killing Stark in his original life when we fought and I defeated him on Titan.”

“That has been your weakness,” said Tony quietly. “Your lust for power in your quest to save the universe has led you to this moment. We do not have to kill you.”

Natasha could feel Tony’s words in her mind, what the immense power rushing through their bodies was telling them. The choice they could give to Thanos in the hope he may take it as an option which meant they wouldn’t have to kill him.

Even now the Stones, the voices in their heads still wanted to grant him mercy, the chance to walk away for good and make something better of himself.

“You’re offering me a choice?” spat Thanos angrily, clenching his fists tighter around the hilt of his sword.

“We do not have to,” replied Natasha, her voice echoing.

“But the choice is simple,” added Tony. “Live or die. Whatever choice you make informs our next actions.”

“I make a different choice,” snarled Thanos.

Not unexpected, the Titan lifted his sword and ran towards them, intending to strike them down with it.

Neither of them moved.

They let him come.

Thanos struck the invisible barrier that Tony had formed around himself and Natasha, protecting
them from any attack made against them, bouncing off it and falling onto his back.

“What?” Thanos growled.

“Despite what you did to Pepper,” said Tony, now moving his right hand towards Thanos, “the Stones wanted you to have a choice. I hoped you’d choose to fight. But it isn’t really going to be a fight now, is it?” He cocked his head to the side.

“You couldn’t harm me before!” grated Thanos. “What makes you believe you can do so now?”

Tony’s lips moved slightly upwards but he wasn’t the one to answer.

“As long as Tony is linked to me, he has the powers of all the Infinity Stones at his disposal. I sacrificed myself for the Soul Stone and I survived. The Soul Stone is as part of me as much as it is a part of Tony. Ultimate power. Without me, you would never have succeeded in harnessing the Stones from Tony. Soul is part of us both.” Natasha smirked. The Stones were still talking to them, prodding them in what to say, even if they had been unaware of the information themselves.

Tony held up his arm. “I do not need to snap my fingers to kill you.”

Thanos roared angrily and charged again, hitting the barrier Tony had formed around himself and Natasha, now making it visible to the naked eye.

He clutched Natasha’s hand tighter. “Ready?” he asked.

She nodded. “I am.”

They closed their eyes, seeking one another in their bond. A powerful surge roared through them and as Natasha opened her eyes, she saw Tony had changed. His body was glowing brighter, far fiercer than ever before and his eyes were now glowing brightly as he held up his right hand, holding it in the same position he did when he fired repulsors from his suit.
Thanos kept bashing against the barrier and Tony let it fall.

The Titan stumbled as the barrier gave way.

“You cannot win!” Thanos declared, panting heavily, but there was fear evident in his eyes as he looked upon the forms of Tony and Natasha.

Tony shook his head. “No, not alone I can’t.”

A slight smile crossed Natasha’s face. “But we can together!”

The burst of energy from Tony’s palm hit Thanos right in the chest, pushing through the armour and into his skin, breaking apart the skin, digging deeper into Thanos’ body, through his muscles
and ligaments, and into his organs, stopping every single function at once. The energy pierced through and out the other side of Thanos’ body, tearing him apart bit by bit until he was nothing more than dust in the air.

The energy didn’t end there.

It sought out every member of Thanos’ army still on the battlefield, taking them all within its grasp, turning them all to dust like Thanos before them.

As the last enemy fell, Tony slowly lowered his arm, his eyes returning to normal and he released Natasha’s hand.

He cast his gaze about the battlefield.

No enemy had been left alive. Every remnant of them had gone, disappeared forever.

Tony let out a breath.

“We did it,” said Natasha quietly. “Together, as we were supposed to.”

Tony’s shoulders felt heavy. Despite the heavy cost they had paid, they had won.

It was finally over.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

So, Tony and Natasha won. Thanos is gone. Dead. For good. For a brief moment, the Infinity Stones were talking through Natasha. For Tony to be able to unleash his full potential, he needed to be linked with Natasha. Tony still had the power to destroy the universe if he really wanted to on his own but the important factor is, is without Natasha grounding Tony and bringing him back, Tony would not have been able to harness his powers and direct them only at Thanos and his army. More will be explained in the following chapter...

Next chapter will be posted next Sunday 3rd May. It is titled: Old Souls... So, answers are forthcoming...

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirty-Five: Old Souls

Chapter Summary

Things are explained to the Avengers...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments so far! Hopefully, this chapter will answer your questions on a few topics...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five

Old Souls

Thursday 9th August 2018

Pepper’s body remained where Tony had sent it earlier on in the battle. Scott and Hope had succeeded in keeping her body safe. Tony ignored the looks of everyone left alive on the battlefield as he made his way over to the body of his wife. He didn’t want to face anyone now. He just wanted to be alone.

But he had nowhere to go. The Compound had been destroyed and the closest facility was a few miles away.

Kneeling down he reached out and moved the hair out of her face.

She looked so peaceful, looking like she was just asleep and would wake up at any minute. But her heartbeat no more. Her chest did not rise or fall with breathing. She was completely gone.

“I’m sorry.” He bowed his head as he finally let the tears fall. “I couldn’t save you.”

There was the shuffling of feet from behind him and he knew the other Avengers were there. He didn’t turn around. He didn’t want to see anybody.

“There is a way to save her.” Natasha knelt down beside him. “Is there anything I can do?”

He remained silent for a while until he finally felt ready to speak. “No. Just leave me.” He reached out and stroked Pepper’s cold cheek again. “This wasn’t how it was supposed to end.”

“Tony…” Natasha hesitated. “I think there is a way to save her.”

Carefully and slowly Tony turned to face her, getting to his feet, ignoring the stares of the others who were keeping their distance. “What do you mean?”

Natasha folded her arms over her chest, frowning slightly.
Tony could feel slight nudges on their bond as if Natasha was internally speaking to someone in her mind. “Who are you talking to?” he asked quietly, so as not to arise suspicions from the others.

“She was talking to us!”

The voice echoed in his head.

“I think we deserve an explanation,” said Natasha. “All of us do.” She indicated the small group behind her. They could see something odd was going on.

“Nat… what’s going on?” Bruce asked hesitantly as he moved slowly forward, having already removed himself from his Hulkbuster suit.

“There is one thing Tony and I have kept secret from you. You were one of the few to know our true origins. As did Steve, Wanda, Rhodey, and… Pepper. But the rest of you…” Natasha shook her head. “We couldn’t tell you.”

“Nat…” Tony spoke up quietly. “This… We shouldn’t be discussing this here. Pepper shouldn’t have to stay here. I need… need-” His voice was starting to break.

“Ok. We’ll explain everything elsewhere,” nodded Natasha. “Where do you want to go?”

Tony glanced around the battlefield. The Compound would have been the perfect place to have gone but they were sitting within its remains and it was not an option.

“Somewhere safe where Pepper can rest,” decided Tony. He wanted her off this battlefield.

Doctor Strange stepped forward. “How about the Sanctum in New York? There is a large hall we can use and a side-room for your wife.”

The idea had merit and Tony readily agreed.

T’Challa stepped forward. “I and my people can attend the dead here and help to clear the wounded. I am not an Avenger. It is not my place to seek answers to something which does not concern me.”

“I think we can agree this would be the safest place,” said Natasha. She glanced over the other Avengers. “Anyone else going to stay and help?”

Carol moved forward to the front of the group. “I will. I haven’t been around much on Earth. I’m sure our paths will cross again.”

“And we will help too,” answered Gamora. “We’re not Avengers. But whatever you need to say does not involve us.” Quill looked like he disagreed but Gamora shot him a look. “We’ll help out here too.”

Strange created a portal whilst Tony gently lifted Pepper’s body from the ground, hugging her tight in his arms. He passed through the portal and into the Sanctum where he found a small bedroom located just off from the hall.

Tony laid her body down on the bed, the tears threatening to fall once more as he tried to maintain some composure. No matter how much he wanted to rage on his grief, there were things that needed to be discussed and questions that would finally be answered.

There was a soft knock on the door to the room and he opened and saw Scott and Hope standing
there. “What?”

“Scott and I have agreed to stay here and watch over her for you. With your permission, we can begin removing the rest of her armour, make her presentable…” Hope asked cautiously.

She was wary of what his response would be, he could tell, but he nodded his acceptance. He knew he wouldn’t be to do it himself; he’d break down. “Thank you.”

Taking one last look back at Pepper’s body, Tony swallowed his grief and walked back into the hall where the others waited for him.

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“You said we all deserve explanations,” said Steve, glancing between Tony and Natasha.

“We do not know everything,” replied Natasha hesitantly. “We hope we both may get answers too.”

“How can you explain everything if you do not know everything?” inquired Sam, folding his arms across his chest.

“Through us!”

The voice echoed throughout the room and then there was a bright flash of light erupting from Tony’s body and the six Infinity Stones appeared, hovering in the air in front of him.

“What the-"

“How?”

“What the hell just happened?”

A variety of responses echoed out around the room at the appearance of the six Infinity Stones now floating in front of them.

“They’re the Infinity Stones,” said Natasha, pointing out the obvious fact. “Tony has been absorbing them and has powers because of that. And you also know both of us came back in time to change things. This is where we have been altering our history a bit. We didn’t technically come back in time…” She shot Tony a glance, wondering whether he wanted to pick up from here.

Tony sighed, knowing he would have to contribute but not really wanting to. “In our future, Thanos won. He wiped out half the population of the universe when he assembled all six Infinity Stones together. Some of you in this room died. Some survived. Myself, Natasha, Steve, Clint, Thor, Bruce, and Rhodey all survived. The rest of you… perished. We spent five years living in a world without you all whilst the world and the universe tried to cope with the culling Thanos had inflicted upon it. It was 2023 when we found a way to go back in time and retrieve the Stones. Thanos had destroyed them in our present, meaning we had no choice but to take that path. We collected them all… but not without losses.”

Natasha spoke up. “To retrieve the Soul Stone, a sacrifice had to be made. I sacrificed myself so we could retrieve the Soul Stone. I died that day.”

There was a muttering of shock throughout the room.

“Does that mean Stark died too?” queried Sam.
“We’re getting to that,” replied Natasha. “After I died, I retained consciousness. I didn’t know where I was. Just orange skies… orange water. I was… alone. I’m not sure how long I was there for either… But that was when I heard a voice calling my name, telling me I had a choice to make. I could accept my fate and move on or live again and save everybody. I chose the second option. I decided to live again and then I woke up here, in 2014, just before HYDRA attempted to use Project Insight. I couldn’t change anything… The voice stayed with me, telling me it was too early to try to change things, that I had to wait for someone else to arrive and I would know when it was time to start changing things.”

Tony picked up the story. “To defeat Thanos before, I had to use all six Infinity Stones. He was about to wipe out the entire universe because he knew there would always be those who would try to rebel against the new universal order he had imposed… He thought if he created a balanced universe this wouldn’t happen again. Using all the Stones to defeat him… killed me. I died not long after using them… Pepper was the last thing I saw… Then I woke up here, back in 2016, just before the Accords were due to be introduced. I inserted myself into events I hadn’t been involved in previously. I won’t go into detail of what my past was like. It was after Lagos that Natasha sought me out. We’ve been working together to stop the future we’ve come from, from happening. But we had a connection to one another, something that wasn’t there before.”

“And the ability for Tony to be able to use the Stones,” pointed out Natasha, “without coming to any harm. The Stones are sentient… I know you all have questions but I have too. And the only ones who can answer are the Stones themselves.”

Soul floated forward, shimmering in front of them, forming into a body with a translucent face and long flowing hair. She wore a dress and was barefoot, the exact same appearance Natasha had seen her in after Tony had sacrificed her on Vormir. She smiled gently at Natasha.

“We promised you answers. You shall receive them.”

Each Infinity Stone floated forward, forming into five other figures.

Power formed a masculine form, strong and foreboding even as an ethereal figure. He wore trousers accompanied by a robe over his chest. Reality materialised in a feminine form. Her hair was short and she wore a shirt and a skirt. Space appeared next, appearing a quite thin and a beard peppered his face. Mind took the form of a young woman, wearing a suit covered by a lab boat and finally Time appeared taking a male form, with no hair but looked strong and stern in manner.

The other Avengers wearily stepped back a bit though Natasha and Tony kept their ground.

Soul drifted forward. “What do you wish to know?” She cast her gaze over the team, inviting them to ask as well.

“Why did you pick them?” asked Steve. “Out of everyone in the world, in the entire universe, why pick them? You decided to send them back, why?” He’d picked up on the fact the Stones had to be the culprits as to why Tony and Natasha had originally been sent back.

“Because we saw what Thanos did to the universe and wanted to change it. We cannot change it ourselves, only set the wheels in motion. We have manipulated certain events but our power is limited. We interfered because we must, not because we decided to.” Soul explained.

“Thanos was a disease that had to be stopped. Unbalancing the universe sealed his fate,” added Time. “We chose the two people who had willingly sacrificed themselves to go back and change things. We wanted to give them a second chance of life. Now they have all the time in the universe.”
Power put his hand underneath his chin and frowned slightly. “Natasha Romanoff was chosen because of her sacrifice on Vormir. She refused to allow a family to go without their father, refusing to accept that she should live and he should not, despite what he did during those five years.”

Natasha avoided Clint’s seeking gaze. She suspected he would guess the ‘he’ referred to was himself.

“As for Tony Stark... He didn’t want to die but he was burdened with the knowledge there was only one way to win. He didn’t know if they were living it or not... He only knew when it came to it. He wanted to live to be with his wife and child again... Fate did not allow it. He was the only one who could stop Thanos for good, the only one in the right position to do so. And he knew what the cost would be of using the Infinity Stones. Tony Stark didn’t just save Earth. He saved the entire universe at the expense of his own life. He died a hero. That is why we chose him.”

Shock and sadness reverberated around the room as they took in both Tony and Natasha.

“I had hoped I could have my family again,” said Tony quietly. “Pepper’s dead…”

Soul smiled sadly. “You will.”

Tony raised his head. “What do you mean?”

Soul merely inclined her head.

Tony dare not get his hopes up.

Reality stepped forward. “We interfered when we should not have done. Bringing people back from the dead after they have passed on is difficult... We may be the foundations of which the universe was created but we do not have ultimate power over other aspects of life and death. To bring someone back from the dead is not fully within our power.”

“How did you succeed?” queried Rhodey.

“We bargained,” replied Mind. “To retrieve the souls of Natasha Romanoff and Tony Stark required a sacrifice on our part.”

“What sacrifice?” Steve watched carefully.

“The Goddess of Death drives a hard bargain…” said Time.


“Her body, yes, but her spirit did not die. She accepts souls into the land of the dead. She also has the power to remove them and send them back to life... if she so chooses,” explained Mind. “The amount of energy required to bring back Natasha Romanoff and Tony Stark and to transport them to the past required a loss of life to replace the souls Hela can never receive again.”

Tony swallowed. “What did you do?”

Soul bowed her head in shame. “People died so we could achieve this. We picked those who were old, who was dying, and would have passed to the realm of death within a few weeks, months, or a few years. They all had fulfilling lives before we ensured their deaths. Once a soul has been taken from the realm of the dead, it cannot return.”
An uneasy feeling was settling in the pit of Tony’s stomach. His heart was beginning to beat faster in his chest, his mouth dry as his mind turned as he considered the implications of what Soul was saying. “Are you implying what I think you are?”

Natasha was already nodding slowly.

“You knew?” Tony accused. “And you never told me?”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t.” Natasha didn’t lift her gaze from him.

Tony wanted to scream. The penny had dropped.

“Anyone else confused by what’s going on?” asked Rhodey.

Tony turned on his heels back to the others. “A soul cannot return to the realm of the dead after it has been removed. Nat and I are immortal. We can’t die.”

“Your bodies can be destroyed,” explained Power, “but your souls will continue forever. Your souls will wonder the stars until the end of the universe or you find a new host for your spirit. But we took precautions in designing you to ensure your body would be able to wither a lot more than a simple human body ever could. If you are careful, that body can last you forever.”

Tony stepped back. “Designed me? What the hell does that mean?” And then a memory caught him unaware. Thanos. Back when he had been reading Tony’s mind, he had encountered a barrier after witnessing Tony’s death. He had broken it down and then…

The images assaulted his senses and Tony screamed as the memories flowed through his brain.

Six figures stood around him as he lay on a flat surface.

“We’re sorry we have to do this to you…” One stroked his burned and bloodied face.

He gurgled blood.

“It is necessary…” another replied.

His head was burning up as the forbidden memories flowed through his mind.

Tony was naked. The six figures were moving around him, touching, prodding, healing his injuries.

"He cannot handle our power… No human can."

"Then we must remake him."

More flashes erupted in front of his eyes.

His throat was sore from screaming. “NO! STOP! PLEASE! DON’T! NO MORE! LET ME DIE!”

He tried to fight them off.

They grabbed his head, pushing needles into his brain, injecting fluids directly into his brain, pushing more needles all over his body.

“Your cells need to be changed, Tony…”

Tony was on the floor of the hall, his body buckling, his head swirling with more images. He could
see only himself in pain, in utter pain.

“Shh…” Someone was stroking his hair. “It will be over soon.”

“No. No…” He was muttering. “Please… stop…”

His whole body was on fire, his throat torn and sore from screaming.

“We have to become a part of you…” another voice said. “You are our protector… Remember that…”

Tony was shaking, his body shivering as he became aware of his surroundings once more. “What… what… was that?” He couldn’t shake the pain off, nor the flashes of memory through his mind. He slowly sat up. The others looked concerned for him.

“You just had a fit…” pointed out Rhodey. “There was nothing we could do.” He pointed towards the six manifestations of the Stones. “They told us to stay away, that you’d come out of it on your own.”

Tony winced, his head aching. “What was that?”

“Memories we made sure you would only remember when you needed to. Now is the time.” Soul looked sorrowful, regretful. “We hated having to hurt you. But we could not have you remember before now… Because we feared the memories would destroy you.”

Tony inspected his hands, casting his eyes over them before feeling down his body. “I’m not… human… am I?”

All six manifestations of the Stones shook their heads. “You’re not,” they said in unison.

“Then what am I?” queried Tony.

“Something new,” smiled Reality.

Tony scrunched his eyes shut remembering the last words he had heard. “I’m your protector?”

“Yes,” said Space. “A human body is too fragile to contain our power. We had to redesign your human body, change you into something more. It took us two years to perfect you.”

“You… experimented on me… for two years?” Tony could feel his anger rising. The memories were still in his head. They were not very prominent but he knew they were there. “You never thought to ask me?”

The six figures almost wilted, as if they were ashamed of their actions.

“We were afraid you would say no.” Time tried to justify.

“So we made the choice for you because we knew you were worthy. We didn’t want to lose you,” added Reality sadly.

“I fear it was a mistake on our part not to ask,” finished Soul.

Tony bit his lower lip. “You gave Natasha a choice but declined to give one to me.” He looked down at his hands. “If I knew what I did now, I would have told myself to not take the risk. Pepper is gone. There is no future for me now. And the worst part is, is that you’ve told me I cannot really die! My body can but my soul won’t? You’ve taken my death away from me! I have to live with
her death forever!"

There was a long silence in the room. Tony didn’t want to speak. He was stuck in this situation now.

“He’s your Protector,” mused Wanda, “what do you mean by that?” Her eyes flickered from each Stone in turn.

Soul sighed. “The lure of the Infinity Stones are too great. People will always seek us out. We feel we could be protected for the rest of time by Tony Stark. He can use our powers when he wishes to, in exchange for him keeping us safe. That was our intention in changing him, to ensure it was possible for Tony Stark to wield us and to be an elder of the Universe.”

Thor’s eyes widened. “It’s an honour to be an elder.”

Natasha turned to face Soul. “Does this make me an elder too? But I didn’t have to be changed the way Tony was.”

Soul inclined her head. “It does. No, you did not, because I do not harm anyone who earns the right to wield me.”

“You two would join us as the Old Souls of the universe. Keeping us and the universe safe, only interfering when it is required,” added Space.

“Natasha Romanoff is your anchor. She can ensure you do not lose control, keep you calm… The universe is yours to be, where-ever you want to go,” continued Reality.

Everyone else was staying silent, watching this exchange with interest.

Raising his chin, Tony focused his gaze upon the six entities in front of him. “How can you expect me to keep you all safe – and I suspect I do not have much of a choice here – when the woman I love is dead? You’ve made me immortal… I can’t live without her!”

But Soul was smiling which didn’t impress Tony one bit. “That is why we tried to ensure she died.”

Tony gritted his teeth. “You made sure she died?” He tried to bite down on his anger. “Why would you do that?”

But Natasha got there first. “So, she could be immortal with us…” she breathed in realisation.

Tony whirled to face her. “What?”

Soul smiled gently. “We knew you would not be separated from Pepper. There is a way to bring her back but it involves sacrifice. Hela does not bargain for the souls of the dead easily. She will want something in return. Something you must be willing to give.”

Possibilities. There were many. Pepper could be brought back… but a price had to be paid.

It was with a sinking feeling that his daughter’s face swam into view. “Morgan…” he murmured. He’d have to sacrifice her very existence to get Pepper back. He was sure of it.

Was it worth the sacrifice of Morgan’s existence to do this?

“Pepper would be able to live with me? She wouldn’t age? I guess Nat and I won’t either…” Tony was feeling slightly better but the notion of being able to have Pepper with him was tantalising but
the thought of giving up Morgan for her was a devastating blow.

“Neither of you will age,” intoned Power. “You can show yourselves to be aging if you wish to fit in on Earth… but you can always change back to what you are now.”

Reality inclined her head. “All you would be doing is changing the reality of your situation.”

Tony swallowed. “Right…”

“What would Tony have to sacrifice to bring back Pepper?” asked Steve quietly.

Soul turned to look at him sadly. “It would have be the life of another. Whether a soul that has yet to be born or one who willingly goes in their place… To bring back Tony Stark and Natasha Romanoff and to send them to the past required a larger scale sacrifice. One person would be enough for Pepper.”

Tony swallowed. “How many did you sacrifice to bring us back?”

The personas of the Stones all looked sad and guilt seemed to spread across their faces.

“One hundred people,” admitted Mind. “All of them were close to the end of their lives.”

But they still died when they could have had a few more years left with their loved ones… all because you wanted to change what happened,” noted Tony quietly. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the Stones interfering, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. The sacrifice had already been done and could not be reversed. And if he was stuck in this predicament, protecting the Stones forever then he would rather have Pepper by his side.

“It was the right choice,” replied Space. “We wouldn’t hesitate to do so again.”

“Do I have a choice about being your Protector? Holding your power for the rest of the universe?” inquired Tony. “I can’t say no to this, can I?”

“We hope having Pepper by your side would make it bearable,” answered Soul gently. “Natasha Romanoff would have to remain with you. She holds a part of me within her. It is important we stay together.”

“Tony?” Steve piped up. “What do you want to do?”

Tony took a deep breath. He wanted Pepper and he’d have to sacrifice Morgan’s existence to do so. There was only one thing he could do. “Take me to Hela.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Okay, so I’ve taken a bit of liberty here with Hela and what she can do. I researched what she can do in the comics and she does guard some sort of death realm but mainly for Asgardians but this story is set in the MCU and they have taken the liberty of changing things around… so I figured I could here. So, Hela released Tony and
Natasha's souls from her realm for a sacrifice. This action means Tony and Nat's souls can never return to the land of the dead, thereby making them immortal, though their bodies can still be destroyed, though they are a lot more resilient. Thor believes Hela died in Ragnarok but in this universe she merely returned to her realm of Death to carry on her duties there.

The Stones are offering that Pepper could be brought back but something has to be put in her place: as Tony thinks in this chapter, Morgan. He'd have to sacrifice her existence for Pepper to be brought back, or someone else can replace Pepper in death.

The Stones gave Natasha a choice to live again but not Tony. They chose him to be their Protector and to keep them safe. The choice has been taken out of Tony's hands since he cannot die now. He has to face a future of living to the end of the universe. The good news is that Nat has to be there as well.

The next chapter will be posted next week on Sunday 10th May!

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirty-Six: The Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Tony makes a deal with Hela...the Goddess of Death.

Chapter Notes

You may or may not want tissues with this chapter...

*runs and hides*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Sacrifice

Friday 10th August 2018

If there was one thing Tony felt devastated about, it was the sacrifice that he would have to make to bring Pepper back. If he was going to be immortal for the rest of his life (and it seemed he had no choice in that since the Infinity Stones had taken the choice from him) he’d rather spend it with Pepper, otherwise his existence would be meaningless. If he had any choice now, he’d rather die but death wasn’t achievable for him anymore either.

And he didn’t particularly want to float around the universe as a consciousness which is what the Stones had implied when they’d been explaining things to him.

The Stones had faded back into him and they were preparing themselves to head to the Realm of the Dead. Tony had decided he needed to be by himself. He’d been thinking over and over for a way to save Pepper and still have Morgan. Sure, they’d probably still be able to have kids but it wouldn’t be Morgan… Not the little girl he knew and loved so very much… Or would the provision be, if Tony gave up Morgan, he’d have to give up the right to have children at all?

It was a lot to take in.

“Tony?” Natasha’s voice was quiet as she walked up to him. “Are you alright?”

Tony huffed. “How do you think I could be? For Pepper to come back I have to sacrifice something… It has to be Morgan. There is no other way. The one thing I want most of all in this world and I have to give her up.” He looked down at his hands. “I have the Time Stone. I can control time. Why can’t I just reverse the damage done to Pepper’s body and bring her back?”

*Because her soul has already moved on. Taking her body back to the point of her death will not bring her back.* The voice echoed inside his head and Tony clenched his fists, anger coursing through him.
Right at this moment he hated the Infinity Stones. They’d done this to him. Without his consent and didn’t seem to care. Yet he was stuck with this fate because they deemed him their ‘protector’. He couldn’t die because of their interference. They hadn’t even apologised to him. He felt he deserved something at least.

“If I could change this, I would,” said Natasha quietly. “They always wanted you, Tony, even if I had refused to come back and decided to move on, they still would have chosen you as their protector. They wanted you because they believe you worthy to use their power and to keep them safe from people who would abuse them.”

Tony sighed, his shoulders slumping. “I just wished they had asked. Whatever they did to me when they brought me back was…” He shuddered. “Horrifying. I barely remember it… But I know I have these memories. They… tortured me. Turned me into something I was never supposed to be. Maybe…” Glancing down at his hands, a thought passed through Tony’s mind. “Maybe what they did to me means I can’t have children… Maybe I’m not compatible to produce a human child…” It was an absurd theory. “But they gave me hope, Nat… The Stones did. Before I even knew the voices were the Stones…”

“What do you mean?” Natasha peered curiously at him.

“Did I not tell you?” Tony seemed surprised by then he frowned “Though it may not be something I would have told you…”

“Go on…” Natasha urged him.

“If the Stones set Pepper up to die, why have they always told me the time Morgan was conceived? Was it to give me hope? To keep on going forward? Did they lie?” He looked down at his hands. “They’re effectively holding me prisoner by making me what I am without consent. And now Pepper is gone… I can get her back but at what cost?”

Natasha swallowed, reached out and took hold of Tony’s right hand. “The Stones picked you for a reason. They should have given you the choice. Why was I given one and you were not? If anything, they should apologise for what they did to you. Tony… Maybe Morgan isn’t the sacrifice. Maybe there is another way.”

Tony shook his head. “Can’t be. If what they say is true… Someone has to die or not to exist for me to be able to get Pepper back. I can’t ask anyone to do that for me. It’s too big a price. And no one would step forward. I’m the self-sacrificing idiot, aren’t I? If it was anyone else, I would gladly step up. I always have… even if it hasn’t always been recognised.” His shoulders slumped.

Natasha remained quiet, rubbing his shoulder gently.

“I’m going alone,” said Tony.

“No,” she replied, “you’re not.”

He looked at her sharply. “No one else is coming.”

“Tony.” She looked at him sadly. “We started this journey together. We’re continuing it together. I’m coming with you.”

He bowed his head. Natasha was right. He couldn’t go alone.
The others were waiting for them in the hall. To Tony’s surprise, Steve, Clint, Thor and Bruce were all ready to leave.

He shook his head vehemently. “No. You’re not coming. Only Nat is.”

Steve stepped forward, a stern expression on his face. “Tony, we’re doing this together. As a team. The original six Avengers. Just like we started. We’ve said our goodbyes, we’re coming.”

Tony narrowed his gaze at Steve. Why did the man have to be so stubborn? In a way, he was thankful for their support. He felt he would need it. Sacrificing the life of his own daughter would be heart-breaking. If it meant saving Pepper…

Tony shook his head. He couldn’t dwell on it. Glancing around the hall, he noted the other Avengers were still there, though it looked like they might be preparing to leave.

Bucky stepped forward. “How long do you think you’ll be?”

“As long as it takes to get Pepper back,” answered Tony. He assumed days wouldn’t fly by, hours yes, but not days.

“We’ll be helping to clear the battlefield,” said Bucky. “If you need us…”

Tony inclined his head.

“Bucky, be careful. Don’t do anything stupid whilst I’m gone,” pointed out Steve, smiling warmly at his best friend, as he walked over to him.

A slight smile tugged at Bucky’s lips. “How can I when you’re taking all the stupid with you?”

Steve chuckled slightly, pulled Bucky into a hug, patted him on the back before he pulled away, and joined the others in the group.

“How are we going to get there?” asked Clint, shouldering his bow and arrow bag.

“The Stones will lead the way,” answered Natasha. “They’ll help Tony get us there.”

“It’s not really a realm one can easily reach on their own,” added Thor. “I could-”

Tony raised a hand. “I have the Infinity Stones at my disposal. Don’t you think that will be enough?”

Thor backed down, noting Tony’s expression on his face. He wasn’t happy about the others joining him.

“I’m going to teleport us there,” said Tony. He held out both his hands. Natasha took his left and Steve his right. They formed a complete circle, each person holding hands with the other.

*Realm of Hel. Take me to the realm of Hel.*

He felt a tug on his navel and a hot stream of air cascaded over them as their feet left the ground and then –

They landed in a barely lit cavern. There was a silent, green lake that did not ripple, and all around them were emerald stalactites and stalagmites, and strange whispers came from all directions. What light there was, was tinged green. Eeriness reached around them. There was a small drop off the pathway to the side of them. Mist and fog surrounded them.
The place stank of death.

“If this is what death is, I’m not sure I ever want to come here…” mentioned Clint as the group slowly moved forward.

Ahead of them was a large stone archway.

“The archway leads to the next world,” explained Thor. “We must not pass through it. We will not return if we do.”

“Then how do we get Pepper?” asked Bruce. He had elected to come without armour or any gear. They were not anticipating having to fight. They were here to support Tony in the momentous decision he had to make.

“Hela will come,” said Thor. “She always greets those who are entering her realm.”

Tony glanced over his shoulder at the god. “How come I don’t remember this? I died… passed through that doorway.”

“Memories of death can be terrifying. If you are returned from death, the brain will automatically shield you from the memories. Death isn’t meant to be traumatic. You’re meant to be reunited with your loved ones.”

The female voice came from the archway and as they routed their attention towards it, a woman in a green jumpsuit with a green cloak stepped through. The heavy-lidded make-up on her face gave her a menacing quality and her black hair fell down her shoulders.

Tony swallowed. This had to be Hela.

Thor raised Stormbreaker. “Be careful what you speak of, sister,” he said, threatening her.

Hela smiled, though it was not a warm one. “I have no quarrel with you today, brother. Stay out of things which do not concern you.” Hela’s tone was sharp. She turned her attention to Tony. “Ah. You.”

Tony felt uncomfortable under her gaze but he steeled his jaw and waited. He didn’t want to speak, choosing to wait to hear what this Hela had to say to him.

“You can no longer step into my realm, Tony Stark. You are barred.” Hela’s eyes slit.

“I want Pepper back,” he stated simply.

“It’s not that simple, as I am sure you are aware. The Infinity Stones explained to you what they did just to bring the two of you back,” she indicated Natasha, “and to send you back in time.”

“How do you remember that? It happened in their past but in a future year… It never happened for you,” queried Bruce.

“I know more than you know,” she replied. “I know the exact date each of you dies and the manner of how death finally succumbs you.” Her eyes lingered on Steve for just a few moments longer. “Death is my business. I know instinctively who is barred from my realm. It is my duty to have specific knowledge. This realm is outside space and time. It does not follow the rules of the universe. Souls from across the entirety of time and space flock here all at once. Souls from the Dark Ages arrive with those from the far future. Your Soul has already been here, Tony Stark, and been removed. You can no longer return to death. Neither can you, Natasha Romanoff. But the rest
of you… will come, maybe even soon.”

“Is that a threat?” Steve pushed forward.

Hela laughed, the echoes of it bouncing around the cavern. “No. Just an observation.” She brushed past Steve and circled around Tony, her nimble fingers brushing his shoulders. “There is only one way in which Pepper’s soul can be retrieved. You know what it is. Are you prepared to give it?”

Tony swallowed. “I am.” He was surprised his voice didn’t break. “I don’t want to give up Morgan’s life to you… But I have no choice. Before I came back… her and Pepper were my world. She loved me three thousand… That was one of the last things Morgan ever said to me…” He felt tears welling up in his eyes. “To give her up to save Pepper…”

“It is the price one must pay to bring back those who we love,” explained Hela. “A Soul cannot be returned without sacrifice. I am losing a Soul from my realm for all eternity. It is only just I keep one in return. Do we have a deal?” She was holding out her hand towards Tony. “Pepper Pott’s Soul for the life and Soul of Morgan Stark?”

Tony hesitantly reached out for her hand.

There was silence all around him.

Natasha reached out and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

A single tear trailed down his cheek as he held out his hand to Hela’s.

_I have to do this. For Pepper._

Their hands were about to touch.

“Tony, don’t.”

Tony paused, his hand mere inches from Hela’s.

Steve had stepped forward. “No. You’re not giving up your daughter’s life to save Pepper. I’m not letting you.”

“I can’t do this without Pepper!” responded Tony, but still he didn’t grasp Hela’s hand. “What else can I do to bring Pepper back? Morgan has to be the sacrifice! She can’t live, Steve! I have to let someone go and it can’t be – it can’t – I just… I need Pepper.”

“And you will have her,” answered Steve quietly. “There is another way for you to have Pepper and Morgan. You know it. I know it. And it’s the right thing to do.”

Realisation dawned on Tony, the meaning of Steve’s words.

“The Stones said it themselves,” continued Steve. “Whether a soul that has yet to be born or one who willingly goes in their place.”

Tony shook his head. “No. No. Definitely not. I’m not letting—”

Steve smiled sadly. “It’s my choice.”

Tony searched desperately around, looking to the other Avengers, realising that they had all known what Steve had been intending to do. They were not shocked, just sad. “The others knew…” Tony swallowed. “Bucky… He knew.”
Steve shrugged. “I’m doing something stupid.”

Tony backed away. “No. The world needs Captain America. The world needs you, Steve. Morgan is just a child who didn’t -”

“She’s a child who deserves to live and be with the father she loves,” retorted Steve. “I said this to you before, and I’m going to say it again. The woman I loved is gone. I can never get her back. I have a life here now, something to live and fight for, so people can go home and be with their loved ones. You gave up your family to save the universe. I’m not going to let you lose the chance of having your family again. You’ve already sacrificed so much.”

“But-” Tony tried again.

“No,” Steve shook his head. “I’m giving you the chance to have what you want. Peggy is gone. Bucky is safe. Captain America is a title that can be passed on. Steve Rogers doesn’t define Captain America. Anyone can hold the shield.”

“But you’ll die…” said Tony weakly.

“I’ll be with Peggy,” answered Steve. “Maybe I’ll finally get that dance she owes me.” Steve reached out for Tony’s hand. “Let me do this. For you.”

Tony stepped back. He cast his gaze over Thor, Bruce, and Clint. They had all known. All of them looked sad, even tearful. The prospect of losing Steve was a horrifying thought. But they were not opposing Steve’s choice, as if it was a discussion, they had already tried to have with him before coming.

“We spoke about it,” added Steve. “A child shouldn’t be sacrificed. If it has to be anyone, it has to be me. Morgan deserves life, Tony. Let me give it to her.”

“You’ll lose out on everything,” whispered Tony.

“It doesn’t matter.” Steve was adamant in his choice. “I’ll be with Peggy. It’s what I’ve wanted ever since coming off the ice. Let me do this for you. I don’t know everything about your past before you were sent back… But I do not believe we were really friends. This time it is different.”

Tony was still shaking his head. “No, Steve. Anything that happened before, its in the past… buried, forgotten. This is my life now. My future.”

Steve reached out and placed his hands on either side of Tony’s shoulders. “Tony, I’ll rest easy knowing you finally got Pepper and Morgan. Trust me.”

Hela was remaining quiet however she did perk up at Steve’s statement. “If you choose to die, you will miss out on so much. The family you could have will not be born, will not exist. Are you willing to give up the right of Souls still to be born in your line? Their right to life?”

Steve swallowed. “That’s the exact same thing you are asking Tony to do. The difference is, is that he knows his daughter. I don’t know the people you speak of. I do not have the attachment to them that Tony has to Morgan. He died when she was just four years old. Everything he’s done for the universe is so he can have what he lost. I can’t see myself ever being happy with someone who isn’t Peggy. She may have moved on but I never will.”

Steve was so sure of himself that Tony wanted to weep. Steve was willing to sacrifice his life for Morgan.
“I want to do this for you, Tony. I believe in an afterlife. I believe I will be reunited with Peggy. I’ll get to have that dance. Let me do this.” Steve searched Tony’s gaze.

Tony took a while to answer. Steve was willing to die so Tony could have Pepper and Morgan. How could he say no to it? Steve was adamant, probably wouldn’t take no for an answer. But Tony couldn’t ask someone else to do this. It wasn’t fair.

“And the rest of you,” began Tony, “are you okay with this? With Steve doing this?”

Steve folded his arms across his chest, his expression stern. “They have no part in this. This is my choice.”

“We know what he intends,” said Thor. “He won the argument. We’re here to support him.”

Clint shrugged. “You can’t stop him.”

Bruce smiled sadly. “We’ve tried.”

Tony turned towards Natasha; the only other person he could rely upon other than Pepper. “Nat?”

“Tony…” She looked sad, mournful. “I didn’t know. It has to be your choice. Steve wants to go.”

“I should…” Tony’s eyes were watering. Steve wanted to do this for him. He turned to face Hela. “Will Steve be reunited with Peggy?” He had to be sure.

A kind smile brushed across Hela’s face. “Yes, he will be.”

Tony’s heart softened. It made the choice slightly easier knowing Steve would get what he wanted.

“Let me do this,” pleaded Steve. “You deserve a family more than I do. And you have to live forever. You can’t die. Morgan was the one thing keeping you going. I want to give her to you. Do not give her life away so easily where there are other options available.”

“The others will not judge you, Tony,” explained Clint. The worry in Tony’s face was enough to cause the Archer to break his silence. “They know what Steve intended to do. They will not blame you if we come home without him.”

He felt like he was trapped in a corner but it was one he could easily escape from if he allowed himself to take the specific option being presented to him.

How could they be so understanding of Steve’s choice and not try to stop him? Tony didn’t understand it.

“Morgan is a child. She doesn’t deserve to never exist,” continued Steve, his voice lower. “Please. Let me do this.”

“Steve…” Tony swallowed. He felt upset, sad about the monumental sacrifice Steve was prepared to make.

“I’ve already said my goodbyes,” said Steve. His eyes flickered over to Natasha, apologising for his lack of discussion with her of his intentions. She’d been with Tony at the time.

“Always the sacrificing idiot…” Natasha shook her head, chuckling softly. She reached forward and pulled the super-soldier into a hug, whispering something into his ear.

Steve grinned. “Definitely.” He returned the hug then faced Tony. “Please, let me do this for you.”
The weight was unbearable on his shoulders. It was heavy but Tony knew what he had to do. Steve intended to do this, no matter how Tony argued against it. “Ok,” whispered Tony quietly. He raised his gaze towards Hela’s. “Steve’s life for Pepper’s Soul.” He held out his hand towards the Goddess of Death.

She didn’t hesitate, taking Tony’s hand tightly and shaking it, sealing the deal. She turned towards Steve. “All you need to do is step through the archway and the exchange will be complete. Pepper Potts will wake and her body healed of the fatal injuries she suffered.”

Steve steadied his shoulders. “I’m ready.”

Tony reached out and grabbed his hand. “Steve... I...”

Steve smiled sadly. “Nothing needs to be said, Tony. This is my choice. My decision.”

The faint trail of tears fell down Tony’s face and he did something he never thought he would do. Instead of shaking the man’s hand, he hugged him. “Thank you...”

“Just promise me one thing, Tony,” added Steve. “Live your life and enjoy it.”

“I’ve got all eternity, Steve.” Tony wiped the tears away.

“And give Morgan the best life she could ever ask for.” Steve smiled, and turned to face the archway. “I’ve got a date to get to.”

He nodded to the others, their goodbyes having already been given before they had left Earth.

Steve saluted them, glanced back at Tony, and walked purposefully towards the archway.

Tony was about to reach out but Natasha shook her head, gently rubbing his shoulders.

Steve passed through the threshold of the Realm of the Dead and vanished.

- - - - -

Back at the Sanctum, Pepper Stark breathed.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

The moment Steve crossed the archway he died... He was always going to die.

I made my mind up about that a few chapters after I had started this story and it gave me the opportunity to build up to it. This was what I wanted to happen in Endgame... I think it would have been more poignant, that when he was returning the Stones in Endgame, especially the Soul Stone, Steve could have been given the choice to trade his Soul for another Soul. I adapted that idea for this story... Much as I've come to accept Tony's death in Endgame... Steve's still leaves a bitter taste in my mouth... I just think a better ending for Steve would have been sacrificing his life so Tony could live...
again, and Steve gets his dance with Peggy in the afterlife.

I also think it is something Steve would do, especially in the circumstances of this story where Tony is now immortal. For Pepper to achieve that same state she has to be brought back from death and the only way to do that is for someone to take her place, like Steve, forfeiting the lives of any of his descendants, thereby ending a line. Hela gets to keep those Souls, in return for releasing Pepper's.

The other Avengers back on Earth had known what Steve was going to do. I didn't want to include that conversation since it would have spoiled the end of this chapter. It may be a scene I write as a missing scene companion piece to this story later on...

The next chapter is titled 'Awakening' and will be posted next Sunday 17th May.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirty-Seven: One September Night

Chapter Summary

Pepper wakes.

Chapter Notes

Wow, thank you so much for the response to the last chapter! I’m so glad you all liked how Steve chose to sacrifice himself. I was nervous about posting it but I didn't have anything to worry about!

We are now coming to the end of this story. I can't believe we are now in the home run!

I hope you all enjoy this chapter and be warned, the last scene, set in the Stark Cabin is a sex scene! And I'm sure you can guess why it was included ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN - One September Night

Friday 10th August 2018

The Sanctum

When they returned to the Sanctum Tony saw Pepper sitting with Hope and Scott, who had remained behind to look after her. Rhodey was there as well, standing off to the side, now free of his armour. The rest of the Avengers were nowhere to be found.

But Tony had eyes only for Pepper.

“Pep…” he breathed. It had worked. Steve’s sacrifice had worked. “Pep…”

And he was running towards her. His heart pumping fast in his chest as he wrapped her arms around her, pulling her into a hug, pressing her body against his. She was real. She was here. “Pep…” he breathed; his eyes wet. He pressed his lips against her soft ones, tenderly stroking her cheek, the other hand stroking the back of her head. “I thought… thought… I’d… lost you…”


Tony could hear the sound of shuffling feet and knew the others had left the Hall, giving him and Pepper the privacy they needed.

Her eyes were searching his. “I died… Tony… I died…” There were tears welling in her own. “He stabbed me… How…”

“Pep…” Tony led her to a chair and gently sat her down. “Thanos killed you. And Nat and I
defeated him… The Stones said we could bring you back. But a sacrifice had to be made…”

Pepper gripped his hands. “A sacrifice?”

“Someone had to die or not exist for you to be saved…” Tony hesitantly explained. He gripped her hand tighter. “I thought it meant Morgan…”

“Morgan?” she whispered. “Our child?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah…”

“You didn’t? Please tell me you didn’t…” One hand was on her belly as if already mourning for a child she would never carry.

“No, I didn’t.” Tony bowed his head. “Steve… He took your place… Steve’s gone. He’s with Peggy.”

Pepper searched his eyes, seeing nothing but the truth with them. “Steve died for me?”

Tony nodded. “He did. He wanted to. The others knew he was going to do it before we left here… I didn’t know. I don’t know if I did the right thing if getting you back was worth the price… Steve forfeited the right for any Souls that came from him to live. They will never exist because he’s dead… Never have the chance to be born, to experience life… Steve knew about Morgan. I told him about her. How much I loved her and wanted to see her again. Steve promised me he’d make sure it happened… This was the only way for him to keep that promise.”

“I… I don’t know what to say…” Pepper murmured quietly, her hair falling past her face. “He… gave his life up…”

“There was no stopping him… I could have given Morgan up but it has been her and you who have kept me fighting, working towards a future I wanted to have, that I did have. Steve didn’t want a child to take the fall of something he could do about…” explained Tony. “Self-sacrificing idiot…” A slight smile tugged at his lips. “But he wanted to do it. I couldn’t say no… Not when the others had already accepted his choice.” Tony bowed his head. “He wanted to be with Peggy… and he is.”

Tears fell down Tony’s face. Crying wasn’t an emotion Tony was accustomed to but now was the right time to do so. Everything that had happened the last few weeks had built up to it. Now was the time to let go.

“Tony? Look at me.” Pepper urged him, lifting his chin up with her fingers.

His lower lips were wobbling. He shouldn’t be upset over this. Steve had done this to help Tony have the life he wanted.

“I’m alive because Steve gave me another chance. We shouldn’t waste it. He made the choice so you wouldn’t have to.”

Tony nodded. “I know…” He fidgeted. “Pep… Steve’s sacrifice means something else too.”

She looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“We can’t die.”

“What?” Pepper stared open-mouthed at him. “Please tell me you’re joking.”
It was a natural reaction to have and Tony didn’t blame her.

Before he could respond, he heard Natasha answer for him. She’d returned to the hall, slipping in unnoticed. “He’s not. All three of us cannot die.”

“Why?” Pepper searched their faces for the truth.

Natasha’s body glowed orange and then Soul appeared.

Pepper jumped up in shock. “Is that-” She shook her head in surprise. “Why do these things still surprise me?”

Natasha shrugged, a slight smile on her face. “Because you do not expect to see the manifestations of the Infinity Stones to appear?” She held her hand out. “This is Soul. She tends to reside with me but she does hop between myself and Tony.”

Pepper swallowed. “Right.”

“The others will not appear,” explained Soul. “I can answer all your questions.”

Pepper cleared her throat. “Is it true what they are saying? I cannot die?”

Soul calmly nodded her head. “I’m afraid it is true. Your body can be destroyed but your Soul will continue to live. You could always inhabit other bodies but it does mean you would be killing someone else to achieve that. Your Soul can no longer move on. Once it has been removed from the Land of the Dead, it can no longer return, thereby giving you immortality. The bodies you reside in now can last you until the end of the universe, if you are careful. They will not age but you can appear to age if you wish it. Your husband has the ability to alter reality around him, he can make people believe you are aging so as not to arise suspicions of your true existence.”

Pepper turned to face Tony. “How long have you known you are immortal?”

“Only just found out,” he admitted. “Nat was given the choice to decide whether to come back or not… She chose to. But… I didn’t.”

Pepper studied him, her face scrunching up in scrutiny. “What do you mean?”

“The Stones never gave me the choice to decide whether I wanted to come back or not. They only gave it to Nat. And…” Tony lifted his head, “…I know I’ve done the same as them. You were not given the choice either and now we’re both immortal through no choices of our own.” Tony faced Soul. “Do you not see that giving me no option what you’ve condemned me to?”

Soul bowed her head. “The Universe needed you.”

Tony walked up to her, facing her, anger rippling across his face. “No. You needed me! You could have let me rest! I was ready to die!”

“No, you weren’t,” interjected Soul before Tony could continue his rant. “You didn’t want to. You wanted to be a father to your daughter. But you gave your life for everyone else to have what you could not. You were worthy to wield our powers. You said it yourself. If we’d given you the choice, you would have declined.”

“But you still should have offered it to him. You took it out of his hands!” Pepper accused Soul. “And yet… you show no remorse for it! You’ve made Tony like this!”
“And they also made sure you would die too,” added Tony quietly, “as they knew I wouldn’t be happy being immortal without you. But I did to you what they did to me. You didn’t have a choice either. I’m just like… them.”

“No, Tony, you’re not.” Pepper searched his eyes, smiling lightly at him. “If you have to live forever, I’d rather it was with me by your side so you’re not alone. I do not believe you can survive without me, Mr. Stark.”

“Pepper…” Tony leaned in close and pressed a kiss to her lips.

But Pepper drew away from him and turned to face Soul once. “But you still do not want to offer an apology to him, do you?”

Soul peered at her carefully. “We’ve said it to him before. It does not need to be said again.”

Tony glared at Soul. “I do not remember you or your siblings ever apologising to me.”

“It’s in the hidden memories. We apologised to you multiple times when we were changing you. We hated having to hurt you. Every single time you screamed, we apologised. Every time you said you wanted to die, we apologised.”

“I don’t remember it!” retorted Tony. “Any of it! You stopped me from remembering it, by putting a barrier against it in my head! Even now, I know the memories are there, I still cannot access them! You let them out only when you think I can handle it! Even now you are still fiddling with me!” He folded his arms across his chest. “You’re not making it easy to want to stay a part of you. But I can’t force you out of me, can I?”

Soul shook her head. “No. But we can leave if you want. But we offer you protection. Our powers can keep you strong. Can keep you healthy. We recognise we did you wrong. Would you have agreed if we’d told you Pepper could be by your side forever?”

Tony sighed. He turned away, rubbing his eyes. He was tired and fed up. So much had happened in the past day that he really needed a long sleep to recuperate from it. “I don’t know.” His shoulders drooped.

“Tony?” Pepper inched forward. She rubbed his back. He was quite tense.

Natasha observed carefully. “Interesting thought, do I have to stay with them for eternity?”

“Yes.”

Natasha groaned. “This is going to be utter torture.”

Tony scoffed at her remark. “I’ve got to spend the rest of the universe with you too, Romanoff, the feeling is mutual!”

Natasha laughed. “Honestly, Stark, if I had to spend the rest of the universe with someone, you’re the fun one. Besides, you’ll be outnumbered. Me, Pepper and Morgan…”

“Morgan… We have a daughter?” interrupted Pepper, her eyes widening.

“Will have,” Tony corrected. “I hope.” He’d spent a long time keeping the identity and gender of their child from Pepper, wanting it to remain a surprise but now she knew. “If you still want to.” Pepper might decide she didn’t want to have a baby.
Pepper’s hands found her belly, rubbing it gently. “I do.”

Tony’s lips twisted upwards. “Good.” He pressed a kiss to her lips.

Soul drifted closer to Natasha. “Even though you think little of us, we did what we thought was best for you, Tony Stark.”

“I’m grateful you’ve given me another chance, but having a choice would have been better,” he answered quietly.

Soul inclined her head. She was silent for a long while. When she finally did speak, her words surprised them, as they were ones Tony hadn’t been expecting to hear from her. “We are sorry for not giving you a choice.”

He didn’t verbally acknowledge the apology, just inclined his head. It was the least he could do. After all, he wasn’t entirely sure they meant their apology. For now, it would have to do.

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Tuesday 14th August 2018

They held a small funeral for Steve a few days later. They didn't have a body to bury so the Avengers had held a small service by a lakeside upstate from New York.

The lakeside was land Tony had purchased when he had woken in 2016. It was the same piece of land he and Pepper had built their life on. The lake house cabin had been built already, something he’d been working on, on the sly since buying the land. He’d loved his quiet life here, not having a care in the world. He hoped he could find it again.

They had gathered at the lake's edge where Bucky laid a wreath in Steve’s honour in the water, watching it drift away.

Tony stood by the lake, his eyes watching the wreath on the surface. He had made a small Shield, placing it on the top of the wreath in memory of Steve. The wreath would eventually sink into the water. A hand slipped into his own.

“Are you okay?” Pepper’s voice was quiet. She wore a black dress and her hair was cascading down her shoulders.

“Yeah…” He sighed and turned to face her. He couldn’t help but wonder if his own funeral would have been something similar. He didn’t need to worry about it now. He was here, alive. And so was Pepper. Thanks to Steve. “Makes you wonder though… About death… and… our child.”

“I know,” whispered Pepper. “I’ve thought about it too. Will she be like us? Live forever or will she pass on? I’m not even pregnant yet but I know we’ll have her…”

“Can we live with the knowledge of losing her?” asked Tony. “I don’t think I could have another child… Morgan meant everything to me…But… if we are going to lose her to death at the end of her life, is it fair she will have such a short time with us? She’ll be just a tiny part of our lives…”

“She won’t be a tiny part of our lives,” answered Pepper. “She’ll be a big part of it. And we’ll always remember her. We shouldn’t deny life to our child because she’ll die someday. Don’t forget, if she ever has children we’ll be able to see them grow… Everyone we know is going to die, Tony, don’t forget that. But we shouldn’t deny her life…”
Tony’s shoulders sagged. “Knowing everyone we know is going to die makes me think of one thing.”

Pepper’s curiosity piqued. “What?”

“Being immortal sucks.” Tony deadpanned.

“You get me for all eternity…” Pepper squeezed his hand.

“And there is the silver lining…”

“Come on,” Pepper tugged at his hand. “Let’s drink to Steve’s memory.”

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Sunday 16th September 2018

Stark Cabin

Today they’d officially moved into the Lakehouse. It was almost the same place Tony remembered. He’d made a few changes, making the house bigger to accommodate a third bedroom, for Peter or Natasha when they wanted to stay. The garage became Tony’s lab, as it had been before, though he had an open-planned study connected to the living room where he could work on designs.

He also had a guest house out on the grounds, which Natasha and Peter could also use, but it was mainly for Rhodey and Happy as they both intended on spending more time with Tony and Pepper.

Night had fallen and they’d spent eating dinner out on the deck, watching the stars come out in the cool breeze.

Pepper had gone to bed, and Tony joined her a few minutes later after securing the perimeter and setting the security system in place. The cabin’s location was intended to remain a secret to only a select few people.

She was already in her nighty, gently brushing her hair, humming softly to herself.

Tony slipped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and pressing his groin to her backside. He kissed the bare skin on her neck, leaving gentle, soft kisses on her skin. “Mrs. Stark…” He thrust against her backside, moaning into the back of her neck.

“Someone’s eager.” Pepper leaned back, her head resting on Tony’s shoulder.

“Always,” he murmured.

Gently, Pepper turned around to face her husband, her eyes searching his before their lips crashed together. Her hands were already at his shirt, tugging at it to get him to remove it.

Barely breaking their kiss, Tony pulled off his shirt, his own fingers moving to the hem of her nightie before he helped remove it from her body.

“Well… Mrs. Stark… no knickers tonight?” Tony pressed a kiss to her lips, one arm wrapped around her back, while his right brushed the curls of her opening, dabbing the wetness there before he slid a finger into her.

Pepper moaned at the intrusion, gripping onto Tony’s arms as he stroked inside her, taking it slow
before he inserted another finger, widening her slightly, brushing his fingers against her walls. “Tony…!” she gasped.

He pulled his fingers out, using his free hand to remove his trousers, kicking them off at the feet.

“You’re still not undressed enough…” moaned Pepper, her hand moving between them, fingering the edge of his pants before slipping her hand inside and grasping his hard cock, bulging against the fabric of his pants.

Tony’s knees buckled at the touch and he thrust into her hand. “Need…” He whispered into her mouth.

Carefully he gently pushed her back until her legs hit the back of the bed. Sinking down onto the edge, Pepper pulled Tony with her, their kisses continuing. She shuffled up the bed, watching as Tony whipped his pants off.

He crawled up the bed, kissing the length of Pepper's body from toes to the top of her head, pausing to brush his tongue over her clitoris. Pepper’s hips lifted up at the sensation of his tongue, stimulating her body into throes of pleasure. He moved up, continuing to plant kisses all over her body, sucking both of her breasts as his right hand toyed with her vagina, stroking around the outside of it.

“God… Tony…” Pepper wrapped her arms around him.

He pressed another kiss to her lips. “Pep…” Their eyes lined with one another, and inch by pleasurable inch he pushed his erect cock inside her, filling her whole until they were completely joined at the pelvis.

Pepper’s hands held his hips and she guided him as he began to move slowly and sensually, drawing out his cock to the tip before pushing back in. With each slow thrust, waves of pleasure rocketed through Pepper’s body.

They couldn’t stop looking at one another.

“Faster…” breathed Pepper.

Tony obeyed, flexing his hips faster, moving eagerly. With one hand, leaving the other to steady himself, he lifted her bottom up off the bed, gaining a new trajectory as he continued to pound inside her.

“Fuck…” he whispered.

She could feel the warmth in her stomach growing, knowing she was close. “Tony…” she whispered. “Please… please… come with me… come with me…”

He upped the frequency of his thrusts, panting, pushing himself as deep as he could possibly go, striking a different spot within her each time.

Pepper’s body trembled and she moaned as her orgasm rushed over her.

With another hard thrust, Tony came too, pouring his seed inside of her. He continued to thrust softly inside her, even as he became limp until he finally stopped and looked deeply into her eyes.

Her eyes were shining bright and Pepper stroked his cheek. “Tony…I love you.”
Gently, he pulled out of her, settling down beside her, placing a hand on her stomach, gently trailing his fingers over the soft skin. “I love you too.”

She shifted onto her side. “Tony… is tonight what I think it was? We haven’t… I mean… You asked me to stop taking protection… and last few times you’ve worn protection… tonight… you’re not.”

Tony smiled gently. “Yeah… its what you think it is.” He rubbed her belly tenderly.

“We’re going to be parents…” Pepper’s eyes were shimmering with tears. “Even though I knew it was going to happen… I didn’t…”

“I know.” He caressed her cheek. “I didn’t want to tell you when.”

They kissed gently.

Pepper turned onto her other side, snuggling up to Tony’s warm body, so his groin pressed into her backside. He held her against him, one hand on her belly and the other entwined with her fingers. Slowly they fell asleep.

As they slept, at precisely 11:20 pm, Morgan Stark was conceived.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

And, Morgan exists! Though she is just a bunch of cells at the moment… but she lives!

I originally was going to write a funeral for Steve but I thought the last chapter provided a better goodbye to him so I scrapped the idea of including a service for him.

Tony and Pepper, both being immortal, had to weigh up that, though they are immortal and can live forever, their children would still die. I thought a bit of a moral dilemma for them, whether it was right for them to still have kids bought an interesting aspect to their story.

And, yes, Natasha does have to stay close to Tony for the rest of their immortal existence. Poor her.

Next chapter: Morgan Stark.

To be posted Sunday 24th May!

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirty-Eight: Morgan Stark

Chapter Summary

Morgan Stark... and the end.

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

So, erm, this has turned out to be the last chapter to this story completely. No epilogue. I tried to write one but it turns out I had tied everything up here and it wasn't really needed. I can officially say, Old Souls is FINISHED!

I cannot quite believe it.

There are two illustrations within the text of this story. Special thanks to JediPanda22 for them!

Please read my author notes at the end of this chapter, especially since we have come to the end of this journey!

Please, do, enjoy...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Morgan Stark

Thursday 27th June 2019

Stark Lakehouse

“How is she?” Tony asked quietly, moving to the sofa and sitting carefully beside Pepper.

Pepper peered down lovingly at the bundle in her arms. “She’s asleep.”

Tony smiled, resting his head gently against Pepper's. “She’s like me... She won’t sleep for long.”

“Is that foreknowledge?” pried Pepper, wanting to know more.

“Partly, but, also, you had a baby with me, Pepper. She has Tony Stark as a father. Who else is she going to turn out most like?”

Pepper had to concede the point. “True.” She lifted her chin and glanced at her husband. “For someone who only put in twelve percent of the work, she should be more like me than you...”
“Twelve percent…” Tony started but then realised he didn’t have much of a leg to stand on as Pepper had been the one to carry Morgan the last nine months and then spend nearly a day in labour with her.

Morgan shifted in her arms, her tiny lips puckering. She lay against Pepper’s chest, one arm resting on her mother’s chest, with her tiny face pressed against her. There was a tiny headband, red and gold, resting around her head. A present from Natasha, symbolising that this was the child of Tony Stark.

“Do you two want anything?”

Tony glanced over towards Natasha who had visited them that day and was finishing drying off the dishes, a job she didn’t mind doing for the new parents. He shook his head, thanking her silently for her help before he shifted back on the sofa, leaning forward and kissing Pepper gently on the forehead, one hand resting on the back of her head, and the other hand gently holding his daughter’s tiny arm.

“She’s perfect,” whispered Pepper, gently kissing the top of her daughter’s head.

Tony rested his head against Pepper’s, smiling down at his new-born daughter. “She’s ours.”

By the time Morgan was four years old, it was evident her favourite person was her daddy. She was a curious child, always wanting to know the answers to everything and she always followed Tony around. She had a fascination with his workshop, a place she was not allowed to visit, though
She always found ways to get inside it. Sometimes Tony wondered if Friday worked against him.

She was curious about the Iron Man armours, wanting to have her own when she grew up, something which Tony wasn’t happy about, but as he had told Pepper when Morgan had been born, she was too much like him to not want to have her own suit.

Morgan was smart and intelligent. She was a bright little girl with a big imagination. They’d both known Morgan would match Tony on the intelligence scale but neither Tony or Pepper wished for their daughter’s childhood to be rushed just so Morgan could progress to university faster than anyone else.

She could still be brilliant and make changes across the world into her adulthood.

No, Tony wanted his daughter to have the childhood he wished he’d had. Howard had pushed him. So many things had been expected of Tony that his own childhood had been non-existent. He didn’t have expectations for Morgan. He just wanted her to be happy and live her life to the fullest.

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Tuesday 17th October 2023

It was late at night, the cool breeze air of the lake caught on his face. Tony didn’t care. Today had hit him hard. He’d woken up with an ominous feeling in his chest and he hadn’t known why. The Infinity Stones had lain dormant inside him since Thanos’ defeat. He hadn’t used them for a while. He didn’t feel he needed to. They were safe and protected by him and no one else in the universe knew where they were.

What was it about today that made him feel sad? He couldn’t shake the feeling. Even Morgan hadn’t been able to cheer him up today and she was a bundle of energy capable of doing anything.

“Tony?” Pepper’s soft voice echoed into his internal thoughts.

Tony turned his head slightly. He was sitting by the edge of the lake, his feet close to the water.

“Are you coming in? It’s late… And cold.”

“Soon,” he muttered in reply.

Footsteps crunched on the pebbles and Pepper moved to sit beside him.

“You should go inside. You’ll get cold.” Tony tried to get her to leave.

“You should go inside. You’ll get cold.” Tony tried to get her to leave.

“Tony. Something’s up. You’ve been off all day.” She pointed out, giving him one of her patented looks.

Rubbing his face with his hands, Tony sighed. “I don’t get it. Something about today… I just feel… Sad…”

“I spoke to Natasha,” replied Pepper quietly. “She thinks she knows why you’re like this today.”

“Go on…”

Pepper shifted slightly so she was facing Tony. “This was the day you died, Tony.”

Tony froze. She was right. “But why didn’t I realise myself?” It was a pertinent question. Surely, he should have recognised the date as the day he died originally? “I guess it makes sense…”
Shaking his head, Tony ran his fingers through his hair. “Why is it getting to me?”

“Because your soul is remembering what the Stones did to it after you died. Unconsciously you are afraid it may happen again,” mentioned Pepper quietly, watching for his reaction.

Tony peered curiously at her. “No way did you come to those conclusions on your own.”

“I didn’t. It’s what Nat said when I phoned her earlier.”

“Ah.” That was understandable. “I never really connected this day as the day I died. Everything happened so fast.”

“It didn’t happen this time, Tony. You’re safe. You survived.” Pepper smiled, patting him gently on the shoulder. “You’re with Morgan and me.”

She was right. There was no danger to him dying. He couldn’t die.

She held out her hand to him. “Come on. Let’s go to bed.”

Monday 9th September 2024

Morgan’s first day of Kindergarten seemed to roll towards them at a fast pace. She was excited to finally be going to school so she ‘could learn more stuff’ and ‘make new friends’. Her enthusiasm caught on and both Tony and Pepper had been making preparations for Morgan’s arrival for school.

They still lived in the Lakehouse, not wanting to raise Morgan in the city. They lived close to a town located outside New York, where they had enrolled Morgan and frequently visited themselves for their food shopping. Most of the people there knew Tony and Pepper lived in the vicinity but not knowing exactly where.

Tony was driving Morgan to her first day of Kindergarten. Pepper, at this point, was too heavily pregnant. She was due in a few weeks and she was on bed rest.

Pepper’s second pregnancy had surprised them both. They hadn’t intended on having a second child but neither had they ensured they couldn’t, despite Tony once saying at Steve’s funeral that he didn’t think he’d want any more children after Morgan. He was quite surprised how excited he was when they’d learned they were expecting again. They’d elected not to know the sex of their baby, choosing to find out when the baby was born.

Tony parked up outside the Kindergarten, helped Morgan out of the car, and took her by the hand to lead her to the entrance. The Kindergarten was strategically placed across the road from the local school, the school Morgan would be joining next year.

“Come on,” he urged her, noticing her rather hesitant steps. “It’s not scary. It’ll be loads of fun!”

Morgan looked up at him, her eyes wide. “Daddy, can you stay with me?”

“I’ll be with you, every step of the way,” he promised.

Despite his daughter being hesitant about being left there, Tony was able to leave Morgan in the teacher’s capable hands fifteen minutes later once she’d seen other children being left by their own parents.
She was only there for half the day so Tony spent the morning wandering around town. He didn’t really need to disguise himself. He could be himself without anyone batting an eyelid. They were so used to his presence in the town that Tony Stark wandering down the street wasn’t unusual.

When it was time to collect Morgan, Tony arrived to find his daughter drawing something with another young girl and the two simply did not want to stop, despite it being the end of the day for them.

“But I’m not finished!” Morgan was so like him it was unbelievable.

“It’ll still be here when you come back tomorrow,” he pointed out.

Morgan twisted on her feet, her little lips trembling. She knew exactly the look to use if she wanted her father to do something for her. Tony couldn’t help but indulge her. He wanted Morgan to know she was deeply loved. “But I’m nearly done!”

“But its home time,” pointed out Tony. “The teachers want to go home.”

“But you can look after me, daddy.” Morgan’s lips pouted.

“Sadly, Morgan, I can’t. They need to close up.” He held a hand out to her as her little shoulders drooped. “Want a juice pop?”

“Yes!!!!” Morgan’s excited voice filled the classroom. She began to tug him out of the room, completely forgetting what she had been working on with her friend, just as Tony had hoped it would.

When it came to juice pops, it was easily Morgan's weakness.

Thursday 26th September 2024

Their son was born in the early hours and they were allowed to return home in the afternoon. Tony drove them carefully back to the lake house where Morgan was being looked after by Happy. They’d left the house the evening before, just as Morgan had been going to bed, and Pepper’s pains in her stomach necessitated a trip to the hospital.

Pepper sat beside their new-born son, watching him sleep peacefully. The name they had decided on meant a lot to them, but they hoped their son wouldn’t feel like he needed to live up to the name.

Once they were parked up, Tony helped Pepper out of the car, got the car seat and walked towards the front door.

Morgan opened it and ran towards them, her hair flying out behind her. “Mommy! You’re home! Is baby with you?”

Pepper chuckled, stroking her daughter’s head. “Yes, the baby is here. Daddy is bringing him in. Why not go and wait with Happy in the living room. We’ll be with you shortly.”

The little girl rushed back into the house and Pepper waited on the deck for Tony to bring their son over.

“Still asleep?” she asked.
“Yeah. He’s a sleeper this one.”

“Well…” Pepper began slyly, “he was named after a man who slept for seventy years…”

Tony grinned.

They entered the living room and found not just Happy and Morgan there, but Natasha too.

She smiled at them as they entered. “Happy called me. He thought I’d like to be here.”

“It’s good to see you,” replied Tony. Natasha spent most of her time at the new Avengers Facility but she did keep in touch with Tony. Now that Steve was gone, she had assumed responsibility for the Avengers, co-ordinating them and their outer-space friends, receiving reports of any problems that could need their help. They’d learned over the years that when Tony and Natasha were apart for weeks at a time, they began to feel angsty for one another.

They put it down to the Infinity Stones and the bond that had been forged between them. Clearly, they had to spend time together, not that they minded as they got on so well. Of course, they would be spending immortality together. They were not thinking of the future. They knew they would see friends die but it was too many years away to think of the losses they would have.

He placed the car seat on the floor of the cabin, sitting down on the floor, cross-legged whilst Pepper made herself comfortable on the couch.

Tony held out his hand to Morgan. “Want to meet your new baby brother?”

Morgan nodded eagerly but her shyness overtook her and Happy had to gently push her forward, telling her it would be alright.

She crept into her dad’s lap and peered into the baby carrier. “He’s small,” she said. “I can’t play with him?”

Tony chuckled gently, enjoying Morgan’s innocent take on life. “Not yet. Maybe when he’s a little older.”

“When will that be? Tomorrow? He’ll be older tomorrow.” Morgan’s reasoning was sound.

“No, not tomorrow. Not the next day either. Or next week,” replied Tony, hoping to stem Morgan’s curiosity.

“Next month?” Morgan smiled, brushing her hair out of her face.

“Pep, a little help?” He called for aid.

Pepper laughed. “You got yourself into this, Tony, get yourself out!”

Tony mumbled under his breath good-naturedly. “I’ll let you know when you can play with him, okay?”

Morgan nodded sadly. “Ok, daddy.”

She climbed off her dad’s lap, peered into the carrier again, and went to sit by her mother.

“What’s his name?” asked Natasha.

“Steve Stark,” stated Tony.
A wistful smile crossed Natasha’s face. “Steve would have liked that.”

“Yeah. We owe Steve for what we’ve got now. I wanted to honour him.”

“It was Tony’s idea,” explained Pepper. “If not for Steve, I wouldn’t be here. It felt like the right thing to do.”

Natasha nodded. “I hope he’s enjoying his dance with Peggy.”

“Yeah,” answered Tony sadly, leaning back. “I’m sure he is.”

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Life for the Stark family went on.

Morgan grew into a young, confident woman who was far too much like Tony, that she was in her own Iron Man suit by the time she was fifteen, though under rigorous instructions from her mother that she was not allowed to be in it without her father present. Morgan had mostly taken over Tony’s lab in the garage, something he didn’t mind as he was far more content to watch his daughter at work and marvelling at what she created.

She was a genius. Her grades were sky-high and though they’d had the option to fast-track her school years, both Tony and Pepper decided to not pursue that option. They wanted Morgan to have a normal childhood and friends, something Tony had missed out on himself. Morgan was bright and barely needed to study to keep her top grades, becoming one of the most popular girls in school. It didn’t help that her father was Iron Man, though Tony had effectively retired from the role.

Pepper still ran Stark Industries remotely, passing most of the business off to her various deputies, keeping it running as one of the most profitable companies in the world, leaving the way in innovating design technology.

Steve Stark was her natural successor.

Still, as bright as Morgan, Steve grew to resemble Pepper in more ways than one. Whereas Morgan resembled Tony more and took after him, Steve was Pepper’s double and was far more responsible than his older sister. He had his father’s unkempt hair, but his appearance and hair colour were all the same as his mother, his features more masculine.

Pepper retired from Stark Industries when Steve was twenty-one, passing the baton over to him.

Morgan was content working in the Research and Development lab, though she was more of an Avenger, and helping various charities. Morgan’s inventions grew, gaining her recognition before she had left her teen years.

Over the years, Tony discreetly altered his and Pepper’s appearance to give them the appearance of aging, though their children were aware of their special circumstances.

They’d taken the decision to inform Morgan when she was eighteen and Steve when he was sixteen, though it was mainly because he’d overheard Tony and Morgan talking about immortality in the garage that had prompted Tony and Pepper to sit down with their son and tell him earlier than they had wanted to.

Both Morgan and Steve had taken it in their stride. The news their parents were effectively immortal didn’t faze them, however, questions did arise over how this may have affected the
children themselves. They were also partial to the news that Tony and Natasha had died and come back in time, and that Pepper had been killed but brought back by the sacrifice of Steve Rogers.

Steve Stark had always known he’d been named for Steve Rogers because of his heroic sacrifice for Pepper but he had not known the full story until his parents felt it was the right time.

It was one evening in late 2045 that Tony finally decided to talk to the Infinity Stones again.

Saturday 14th October 2045

He hadn’t heard from them in years, nor had Natasha. The voices had kept silent all this long time.

“Do we want to go down this road?” asked Pepper quietly. “Find out if our children are like us?”

“They want to know, Pep,” answered Tony quietly. “If we can find out the answers, do we not owe them this?”

“And the only things in existence that may be able to help are in us,” pointed out Natasha. She eyed Tony carefully. “You still haven’t forgiven them, have you?”

“No.” Tony’s feelings for the Infinity Stones were complex. He was grateful they’d allowed him to have Pepper and his family, but on the other hand, the fact they’d tortured him and turned him into their own weapon still grated on him. He doubted those feelings would ever abate. In response, he’d decided he would only use his powers when he absolutely needed to, and that was only when the Earth faced world-ending threats, where it was easier for Tony to step in than risk mass casualties. “I don’t think I ever will. They tortured me, Nat. Soul may have ‘apologised’ but they do not understand the full consequences of what they did to me. Not giving me a choice? I can’t forgive them. The only thing I can do is keep their powers suppressed.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Natasha. “I think if it was me, I’d be the same… but I have no ill-will to them.”

“I know. You’re lucky.” Tony dipped his head down. He closed his eyes, feeling for his powers. He hadn’t used them in a long time. We need to talk. He projected out, hoping the Stones would listen and emerge.

They did and six forms stood before them, observing their protector quietly.

Soul spread her arms apart. “What do you wish to know, Tony Stark?”

It was Pepper who spoke. “Our children. They’ll die, won’t they?”

Soul nodded. “They will. No one is really given a choice whether they want to die or not.”

“Children of immortals tend to exhibit the same lifespan of their parents,” interceded Power, “however your immorality was granted in an unnatural way and therefore cannot be passed on to your children. The only way they would do so would be to make a sacrifice to ensure their longevity. But would you be willing to tell them that? To be immortal, they’d have to become murderers? To willingly kill someone they love, take such a selfish action? The normal rules do not apply to us and we can choose to sacrifice who we wanted to bring you both back as we were already higher forms of life. But for you, as you did with Steve Rogers, you willingly gave his life for your wife. That is the only form of sacrifice your children can make if they wish to join you in immortality.”
Time drifted forward. “And would you really want to give a terrible choice to your children?”

Tony folded his arms at that. “No… I wouldn’t.” He couldn’t willingly burden Morgan or Steve with it. However, he couldn’t stop his following comment. “Still would have liked a choice myself though.”

They didn’t yield to the joint apology he still wanted from them. They didn’t see they still needed to, despite Tony’s continued insistence upon it.

“We can make you a promise, Tony Stark,” said Space. “The Stark family bloodline will be protected. You did the universe a great favour. We can only repay you this way, that your line shall never fail.”

Tony swallowed. It wasn’t the circumstances he’d wanted but his line never-failing was one good thing to come out of this.

There would always be a Stark on Earth to protect it.

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Sometime in 2048

At age twenty-nine, Morgan Stark became a mother. She’d married a year before, the day being one of the happiest days of Tony’s life, to be able to see her marry the man she loved.

She married a young man who she worked within the Research and Development lab at Stark Industries. She was happy and contented, a credit to Tony and Pepper’s parenting that she had found someone to love her at such a young age, and still respect her need to go gallanting about in an Iron Man suit and save the world.

It was around this time that Tony’s desire to leave Earth began to build, slowly increasing as the years went by. He knew it was partly the Infinity Stones making him feel like this as it affected Natasha too, as she started to roam the Earth more, not able to sit still, wishing to explore further afield.

Morgan, sensing that her father was waiting longer than he needed to leave, urged them not to wait for her to pass away and to leave before then. After all, to the general population, Tony Stark was getting on in years and they saw him as a seventy-eight-year-old, who was slowing down in years, rather than the overactive, middle-aged man he really was.

As the years passed by, the Stark family grew. Steve went onto marry and provided Tony and Pepper with several more grandchildren. But even he could see it. His father wanted to leave but didn’t want to leave his family.

The yearning for the stars continued as the years went, and soon Tony, Pepper, and Natasha would leave the Earth.

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Thursday 29th May 2070

“One hundred years old…” Tony mused quietly.

Today was the day he passed a century old.
It was also the day he, Pepper and Natasha intended to leave Earth. Most of their friends had gone, and the Avengers were being led by Tony’s grandson, Morgan’s first-born son. Avenging and protecting the Earth seemed to have become a family business. Stark Industries was still running, and the business had started to move into space exploration.

Both of their children were now middle-aged.

For the last month, Tony, Pepper, Morgan, and Steve had spent time together at the lake house, knowing that the time was coming for their parents to leave. They’d already said farewell to their grandchildren, all of them knowing Tony and Pepper were leaving them, though most were unaware they were leaving Earth. They had assumed Morgan and Steve were caring for their elderly, dying parents.

It was during this time, Tony finally reduced the aging of himself and Pepper, returning themselves to the appearance they’d had when they had originally died.

Pepper rubbed his shoulder. “Never thought you’d reach that age, Mr. Stark.”

“I’ll be a million years old before we know it,” teased Tony.

Pepper rolled her eyes.

“Mom, are you sure you can put up with dad for the rest of eternity?” sniggered Morgan, her brown hair falling about her shoulders.

“Honey, I’ve looked after your father for years. He hasn’t put me off yet.” Pepper grinned and kissed her husband on the cheek.

The cool breeze of the lake echoed around them.

“It’s nearly time,” said Tony quietly. He could feel it.

“Will you miss this place?” asked Steve, observing his father’s reactions closely.

“This place, yes, both of you, yes. The world… But we’re doing the right thing. It’s time. We can’t stay on Earth forever, not with what I carry. And, yes, I can change our appearances to blend in… I want to be me. I don’t want to be anyone else or look like anyone else. For us to be able to live normally, we have to leave. And a part of me yearns to be out there. I was content before but…”

“Do you think it’s the Stones?” whispered Morgan.

“I do,” he replied. “But I also think it’s because they’re not meant to stay in one place at the same time.”

He glanced over as Natasha approached them. She carried a little duffel bag with her, a few belongings she wished to take with her, for Tony wasn’t leaving without her.

Pepper pulled her son into a hug, tears falling down her cheeks. They had known this day would come, but neither wished to see their children grow old and die, and it was time to leave, at the turn of Tony’s one-hundredth year, a date they had all agreed on a few years ago.

Tony shook his son’s hand then pulled him into a hug. “Look after your sister.”

“Dad, I think Morgan is the one who will be looking after me,” retorted Steve, laughing.

Tony grinned and walked over to Pepper and Morgan. He pulled Morgan into a hug, kissing the top
of her head, as Pepper rested her own hand on Tony’s arm, hugging her daughter from behind. It would be the last hug Morgan would ever have from her parents.

“I’ll miss you mom… dad.” Morgan let her tears fall. She was happy for them, but also sad for the loss from her own life. “Just… promise me, if Earth is ever threatened, please protect it.”

Tony wiped the tears from his daughter’s face with the tips of his thumbs. “I will. And you know what to do… what to pass on.”

Morgan nodded, wiping her eyes dry. “I do.”

He’d given her and Steve a small communicator device each, one which was linked to a wrist-strap on Tony’s right wrist. If Earth needed Tony to return, all they had to do was call him. Send a coded message for help and he would come straight back. He wouldn’t leave Earth defenceless. The communicator device would pass on down through the family, with strict instructions to use it only in the direst of situations.
“Just remember, we will always love you. Both of you… we’re proud of you. And we’ll miss you.” Tony couldn’t help his voice cracking.

He turned to face the lake, the lake where he had made his home, and where the memories of Tony and Pepper would be laid to rest. Tomorrow the world would learn of the passing of Tony and Pepper Stark. They’d already issued the release of Natasha’s own passing a few years ago, giving Natasha the much-wanted notoriety, she needed and she’d spent the last few years going across Earth, exploring all the places she had always wanted to go, without worrying about being recognised.

But for them, life would continue onward in the stars.

Tony took hold of Pepper’s hand. “Pep.”

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Ready?”

Pepper nodded.

“Nat?”

She held his other hand. “Been ready for a long while, Stark.”

“Then let’s go.” Taking one last look at their beloved children, Tony closed his eyes. Take us to the other side of the universe.

And then they were gone from planet Earth, until the time they were needed again.

-The End-

Chapter End Notes

And, it is over!

When I was writing this chapter I didn't expect it to turn out to be the last chapter. There was supposed to be an epilogue of Tony, Pepper, and Natasha living on some faraway planet but I tried to write it and it didn't work out so I dropped it.

I also decided on Tony and Pepper having a second child. I think they would have if Tony had lived passed Endgame originally, and them naming him Steve I thought was a good choice. :)

I want to say a massive THANK YOU to everyone who has read/reviewed/liked and enjoyed this story! I hope you've enjoyed the ride! I certainly have! I also want to extend my thanks to my wonderful artist, JediPanda22, for all the illustrations they have done for this story! Please follow them on Instagram and check out their other illustrations for other fandoms!

And, now to a few quick questions...

A Sequel?
The ending of this story does leave open the potential for a sequel. I can tell you now, at the moment, I have no plans for a sequel. I had contemplated the idea of, since Tony, Pepper, and Natasha are spending eternity together, of writing a shorter fic detailing a bit of their life travelling through the universe. And it would end up resulting in Nat becoming romantically involved with Tony and Pepper. I'm not entirely sure how that would go down or not. Natasha has to stay with Tony because she holds a bit of Soul and she can help stop Tony losing control of his powers, which is something he still could do. Again, it was an idea but not set in stone and I'm not entirely sure how people would take Natasha becoming romantically involved with Tony and Pepper. If I did write it, it would probably be set in the more Explicit rating than Mature. Let me know your thoughts and we'll see, but at the moment no sequel is set in stone.

**Other Stories**

I have a few ideas floating around.

First is one tentatively titled: "Thanos' World" - in which Thanos wins at the end of Endgame. He spares Earth from his remaking of the Universe, enslaving the population and killing most but not all of the Avengers. Tony is his prize prisoner. Morgan becomes Thanos' new daughter. And Pepper... she's leading a resistance. It will be quite a dark fic. It's in the early stages of planning. I'll probably write a few chapters before I post.

Another story, and this is quite embarrassing to admit, is I'd like to write a story in which the Avengers watch the movies. I've sort of got one being written at the moment but I'm undecided whether to continue or not. It would be set after Civil War but before Infinity War. It would be Team Iron Man and anti-Team Cap, as Team Cap are forced to reevaluate how they view Tony. Ultimately, there would be a story for each film they watch which features Tony. Again, not sure if I will publish this, as I am aware there are potential copyright issues when writing out text of the movies. I know a few other people have written these type of stories but they have been anti-Tony and I wanted to change the mould...

Thoughts/opinions?

That's it for now...

Hard to believe it is all over and we are finished...

Thank you for all your kind words!!

Hopefully, you will join me for my next story!

the-writer1988

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**End Notes**

Please let me know what you think!
Future chapters will be longer. I hope to update weekly!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!