Snapshots

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Summary

Navigating the move to a new planet isn’t easy, but at least they have each other.

A follow-up to Moving Day: snapshots of Tony and Rhodey before, during, and after the journey to Tolsar.

Notes

It’s been forever! I know and I’m sorry! Interview season is nearly over (holy crap, crazy) and I’ve been busy. Also, I recently got on a big Doctor Who kick, watched most of twelve’s seasons (before Amazon decided it wasn’t free anymore at the new year, fuck them) and absolutely fell in love with both him and thirteen, also Bill because she’s the best ever. So now I have like six twelve and Bill stories that I want to write, but I promise I’m not abandoning the marvel things.

Anyway, here’s the next one in the Tales from Tolsar series, since there was a lot of interest in it, more than I’d imagined! Obviously not every story in this series is exactly the same, the setup for how Tony (and Rhodey) get to Tolsar is different sometimes, but this one is in the same exact setting as Moving Day, which I consider the sort of “base” version of this Tolsar-related universe I’ve created (which means the first story in this series, where Amilie rescued a dying Tony directly from Siberia, is actually a variation on what I consider to be the “true” story of Tony on Tolsar, which will be told by Moving Day, this story, and a couple others). Sorry if that’s confusing to anyone, but sometimes I need the setting to be a little different. The first chapter of this story starts immediately after the end of chapter 1 of Moving Day. The first chapter is also very dialogue-heavy and not much actually happens,
but the following ones won’t all be like that.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

There’s a stunned silence in the room after the strange young woman’s pronouncement. Tony glances at Rhodey and sees him glaring suspiciously at the unexpected projection on the opposite wall. Tony himself, still feeling numb and more than a little dead inside thanks to Ross’s little bombshell, decides to keep up with the bold moves. “What kind of proposal?” he asks immediately.

The woman—Amilie—raises her eyebrows as Rhodey makes an angry noise next to Tony, throwing a hand out to slap Tony lightly on the back of the head. “What the hell?” Rhodey says, clearly aimed at Tony.

Tony just stares ahead at the projection, ignoring the fury pouring off of Rhodey next to him at his bold—stupid, he knows—answer. The woman chuckles. “I admit I didn’t expect to get that far that fast,” she says, looking at Tony, “but then, you were always one to jump in with both feet.”

Tony narrows his eyes at that. “Why do you say that like you know me?” he demands, but this time, Rhodey slaps a hand over his mouth.

“I think,” Rhodey says, aiming a deadly glare at Tony, “what he means is who the hell are you, and what the hell is going on?”

She doesn’t look the least bit disturbed by Rhodey’s hostility, but she does nod. “That’s more the welcome I was expecting. My name is Amilie. Amilie Pierce, actually, but no one’s cared about my last name for a long time now. If you want to know anything more than that... we’re going to have to take this one step at a time.” She looks from Rhodey back to Tony. “And in answer to your question, I sound like I know you because I do, at least in a way.” She pauses and pulls an oddly annoyed face. “That didn’t sound quite like I was picturing.”

Strangely, that puts Tony slightly more at ease. Not enough to calm his internal alarms or to negate his suspicion or wariness, but it’s something positive to be said about this stranger. A very human thing to say. Of course, it could all be a sham, but it seemed genuine enough.

It doesn’t seem to have had any effect on Rhodey, who’s sitting as rigidly straight-backed and tense as ever. “How are you doing this?” he says, gesturing to the projection on the wall, coming from his phone, which shouldn’t have that capability.

She gives him a slightly sheepish smile. “Some lovely people here set that up for me. I’m afraid I don’t know the specifics, I’m really not much of a tech person. I just told them whose phone I wanted to send the call to and where it could be found. As for the actual chat and how we’re talking and seeing each other right now, I definitely can’t tell you much about that.”

That sets Tony’s mind whirring. If this is some kind of trick or hoax or attempt to get information out of them, he would think whoever was setting it up would have an explanation for their tech at the ready, some kind of excuse they think he’d believe. It seems odd for the woman—Amilie, assuming that really is her name—not to know. On the other hand, if she’s a real person who’s not lying to them, it does make some sense. Most people don’t know anything about how the tech they use on a daily basis works, after all.

Tony has a lot of questions running through his mind, but Rhodey beats him to it yet again. He doesn’t look the least bit mollified by her non-answer. “How did you know where we are?”
Amilie still doesn’t react to the anger and suspicion in his tone, just answers plainly, “A lot of Earth technology is based on a system of signals sent out and then received by the right objects, that much I do know. As I understand it, the whole planet is just broadcasting its information all the time, to anyone who has the right technology to receive whatever they want. It’s not very difficult for… people here, with their systems and tech, to access just about anything they’d like from Earth; the internet, hospital records, informational systems, government databases, anything.”

If possible, Rhodey tenses even more at those words. They set Tony’s heart pounding a little, too; this woman is saying she’s capable of accessing anything on Earth, pretty much. Nuclear launch codes. Entire government systems. Electronic banking. If Tony’s interpreting it correctly, she’s implying that it’s possible to hack into and mess with just about anything. Tony knew that, of course—he’s hacked into a number of supposedly top-secret government files himself. But he always assumed his skills with tech were nearly unsurpassed, and it would take a tech genius like himself a lot of time and effort to really get into something important. The implication that people with the right technology can get into those things with very little effort is disturbing.

There’s another aspect to that, too, that Tony focuses in on, finally getting a word in before Rhodey can. “When you say ‘people here…’ where is ‘here’?”

She sits back and smiles again. “That would be a planet called Tolsar, just off the core galactic ring.”

The silence stretches on this time. Tony glances at Rhodey and sees a skeptical look aimed back at him—Rhodey asking without words whether he is buying any of this. It doesn’t seem likely at all, but then, they know other planets exist, and according to Thor, are far more advanced than they are. It would make sense, for someone who has the technology to do what she’s doing now to be from another planet entirely.

“You’re on another planet,” Tony says, not quite a question, but clearly a request for more information.

Amilie nods. “Tolsar is a society built on the idea of advancement. Its citizens are all experts in various areas, from agriculture to biotechnology. We’re… not exactly a race in the conventional sense. There’s no natural life forms on the planet we’ve inhabited. We’re just a cooperative group of beings who choose to live and work together.”

“And what is someone from an advanced planet in a galaxy far, far away doing watching little old me, here on Earth?” Tony asks, trying not to sound too hostile.

She laughs, which throws him off, and then her next words throw him off even more. “I’m not a Jedi, although I admit I wanted to be one when I was little.”

Tony feels Rhodey jerk in surprise beside him. “How did you know that reference?”

Her smile softens to something almost sad. “I was born on Earth. 1992, in Indiana.”

Tony and Rhodey exchange glances. Rhodey’s face says he doesn’t believe a word of this. Tony’s not sure he does, either, but he also doesn’t see what this woman has to gain from lying to them so extensively. He can tell Rhodey would prefer to just end the conversation, but Tony wants to know more. He wants to know what she wants, and who she really is, and how she’s doing all this. And if she can contact them like this, Tony’s not sure how they would end the conversation without her agreement anyway.

“Ohay,” Tony says slowly. When he looks back at the screen, he can see on her face that she
knows they don’t believe her. “And how does a nice midwestern Earth girl end up on some far away, super advanced, totally not Star Wars planet?”

She sighs. “That’s a very long story.”

Rhodey gestures, sharply and impatiently. “Well, you’ve got a captive audience here, and we seem to have plenty of time.” He sounds irritated in that way that Tony knows means he’s afraid, but covering it up. It’s how he manages to be calm and cool under pressure, and part of how he’s done so well as a soldier.

She appears to consider Rhodey for a moment before answering. “You’re not a captive audience. At least, I don’t mean for you to be. I made this call hoping to help you, but if you want me to, I’ll end it.”

“Really.” Rhodey doesn’t sound convinced. She raises an eyebrow, almost like she’s about to prove his skepticism wrong by following through, and Tony holds up a hand.

“Wait. I want to hear this.” It’s half directed at her, and half at Rhodey, who’s giving Tony a pissed off look that says they’ll be having words later.

She sighs again. “I’ll try to make this short. I know you’re not going to believe half of this, not at first, but please hear me out. Ask me whatever you need to.”

Tony nods, and she looks away for a moment, like she’s deciding where to start. “I was born on Earth. A perfectly normal human for the first twenty-four years of my life—and then the Flare.”

“Flare?” Tony says. Rhodey has his arms crossed, making it clear he’d rather not be listening to this.

“Exactly what it sounds like. Solar flare, exponentially more massive than the largest ever recorded. It was different from all the others somehow; don’t ask me for details, I don’t really know what the scientists measured. All I know is that it temporarily fried practically everything electronic on most of the planet. We were lucky more planes and cars didn’t crash. But it also affected a ton of people—passing out, vomiting, headaches. I was one of them. Passed out for about five minutes.

“But I was home, alone, and it didn’t take long to figure out that it had happened to a bunch of other people, too. So I didn’t do anything. I felt okay once I woke up, so even though they were telling anyone affected to go to the hospital, I didn’t. Not until a week later.”

She pauses, and in his peripheral Tony sees Rhodey uncross his arms. He’s being drawn in by the story against his will. “What happened a week later?”

She smiles ruefully. “I set a trash can on fire. Clear across the room, without touching it.”

She must see the astonishment on their faces, because her smile turns from rueful to understanding. “I thought I was hallucinating. I managed to get the fire out, but I was convinced I’d either set it myself without realizing it, or hallucinated the entire thing, so I went straight to the hospital. I told them what happened. The psychiatrists came and evaluated me, and they weren’t sure what to do with me, because it didn’t seem like anything was wrong. They told me maybe I was just tired and stressed and had some sort of a minor lapse, and they were going to send me home.

“Before they could discharge me, four government agents showed up in my room to talk to me. Apparently they were monitoring the hospital records, looking for exactly what they’d written about me. Because I wasn’t the only one who was suddenly making things happen that shouldn’t
Tony hums, fascinated. “Manifestation of powers... gene mutations, caused by the solar flare? Or something natural, dormant in you, that was activated by it?” He’s throwing out theories, entranced by the story.

“We were never sure. But our working theory was more consistent with the second.”

“Oh, wait,” Rhodey suddenly interrupts. “This is all a great story, but what the hell are you talking about? That didn’t happen. There was no solar flare that fried our electronics. That’s never happened.”

She nods. “You’re right. As far as I can tell, it never happened here.”

Tony frowns. “I thought you said you were from Earth?”

“I am.” She looks away once more, only for a second, taking a deep breath that Tony assumes is meant to be fortifying. “The Earth I grew up on isn’t the one you’re standing on right now. I’m from another Earth, in another, parallel, universe.”

A long silence follows that pronouncement. Then, “What the hell,” Rhodey says.

Tony tilts his head. “There are theories about it,” he concedes. “But traveling between them—?”

“I know it sounds insane,” she says. “It would have to me, too, even back when I was first learning control over my powers. Even when I was discovering that there were things about the universe we weren’t even close to understanding, the idea of a bunch of parallel universes, and being able to travel between them, would have sounded crazy.”

“But?” Rhodey asks. The skepticism is back in his voice, although he also sounds intrigued.

Another rueful smile. “I grew up. I got older, and I moved out into the galaxy, and I learned more and more. There are ways to manipulate time, and if you want to understand anything about that, you need to understand something about space and the nature of the multiverse as well. They’re too thoroughly intertwined to manipulate one without affecting the other.

“I learned that there are places in space and points in time where the barriers between universes, so to speak, are thinner, weaker. Where it’s possible to cross over. I learned that there are people out there who’ve built cultures around exploring and moving between those universes at those specific points, observing them, cataloguing changes. They’re almost impossible to find, and even harder to understand. And then...”

She sighs this time. “And then, I got cocky. I assumed, because of something I’d done, experience I had, that I would be able to learn more about one of those points of weakness without causing change. I thought I could gain new knowledge. And instead, I fell through it, and I ended up here, where the points of weakness are different, and it could be centuries or more in this universe before I ever have a hope of finding another of those points and trying to get back home.”

For the first time in the conversation, she looks bitter and frustrated. But then the look clears, and she shakes her head and smiles. “But I’m here, and I figured I’d might as well make myself comfortable. It didn’t take long for me to abandon any notion of trying not to interfere in this universe. I might be stuck here for a very long time, which makes this my home for now, and hell if I’m going to sit around and waste my time fighting against the inevitable fact that I will influence it merely by my existence.”
It’s that brief, frustrated look, oddly enough, that has Tony starting to believe her more than anything else. That hint of bitterness over her situation, self-recrimination because she apparently thought she was above something going wrong, and then it did go wrong… Tony’s intimately familiar with those feelings.

Then something else occurs to him. “So, wait, if you’re from another, parallel universe… does that mean you knew me there?”

He gets another nod. “I met my Tony Stark about two years after the Flare. I wasn’t an Avenger or anything, I was just trying to live my life with my powers, but they contacted me for help when they were preparing for the battle with Thanos, and I ended up fighting alongside them.”

Tony and Rhodey exchange glances again, and this time, Tony can see that Rhodey is starting to seem a little more interested too. “Thanos?”

Her expression grows more serious. “The Mad Titan, they call him. As far as I can tell, he’s pretty much the same in this universe as he was in mine. A very powerful, and very insane, being. He thinks that the solution to overcrowding in the universe is to destroy half of everything. And he’s spent years slowly gathering the resources to do it. Followers, armies, and most importantly, the Infinity Stones.”

She looks between Tony and Rhodey as she continues. “Thanos was behind what happened in New York. Loki didn’t lead that invasion, at least not of his own free will. Thanos was the one pulling the strings.”

And all at once, Tony isn’t in the room anymore. He’s light years away, on the other end of an alien portal, looking at that army in space. Thinking that he’s going to die sending in the nuke, and yet knowing that there’s something so much worse out there. Something he has no idea how to defend against.

It’s cold and horrifying, the panic close to the surface thanks to his lapse during Ross’s visit just minutes ago, and it takes a moment for Tony to register Rhodey’s touch on his arm, trying to ground him and bring him back into the present. He takes a few seconds to pull in deep breaths, trying to steady himself, and thankfully, Amilie lets him get himself together without comment.

When he feels steady enough to look back up, she’s watching him with a knowing expression. “What you saw through that portal… That was only a fraction of Thanos’s forces,” she says gravely.

Tony makes a choked sound, and it’s Rhodey who asks, “How did you know about that?”

It’s a fair question; not many people do. Tony’s told Rhodey, of course, and he tried to tell the rest of the Avengers, though they didn’t listen.

“You told me,” she says plainly. “Or, the Tony Stark I knew told me. I told you, I joined up with the Avengers when you got wind that the invasion was coming.”

Both Tony and Rhodey tense again at that. “Invasion?” Rhodey’s voice comes, sharp and serious. Before, she’d said there was a battle with this Thanos character. That’s worlds away from an invasion.

She nods gravely. “He’s coming to Earth, sooner or later. He’s after the Infinity Stones, and his failed attempt before has only made him more determined. Earth has become an obstacle to him, and you, Tony Stark, have become a threat.”
Tony can practically feel his mouth go dry, his heart pounding against his fragile, recently repaired chest. “Me?”

“You sent that nuke through the portal, cutting off the Chitauri and ending the original invasion. You went head to head with Loki and came out the other side, and Thanos was watching through him. He knows your name.”

“That’s horrifying.” Tony can’t think of anything else to say.

“Then you’re just as smart in this universe as the one I came from. Thanos is nothing to mess with, and he already has at least one of the Stones.” Suddenly, her deadly serious expression turns into a smile. “Thankfully, I can guarantee he won’t get them all in this universe.”

Rhodey, next to Tony, shakes his head. Tony notices that he’s been holding onto Tony’s hand for the last several minutes, letting Tony probably cut off all of his circulation with his desperately tight grip. “How can you guarantee that? The Mind Stone is here, yeah, in Vision, but Thor took the Tessaract back to Asgard, and who knows where the hell the rest of them are…”

“There’s one other on Earth, actually,” she says, and they both look to her with wide eyes. “The Time Stone. It’s in the possession of the master of a magical order, whose oath is to protect it. In my time, he came and joined us when he found out Thanos was coming.”

“But how can you guarantee that Thanos won’t get them?” Tony says, hoping they can’t hear the desperation in his voice. God, he can’t deal with this. His shitty, broken body, his shattered heart, the assholes who nearly killed him welcomed back like nothing ever happened, and now this. How is he ever going to get the others to believe this, take this threat seriously, when they never would before? Now more than ever, after everything that happened between them, they’ll never listen to him.

“Well,” she says, and her smile turns into something almost smug, “this would be a part of it.”

She reaches a hand up to her neck and pulls at the chain of a necklace, holding the pendant on the end up for them to see. It looks like a medium-sized stone, deep purple like an amethyst, except that it has a sort of slowly swirling luminescence to it. Tony stares at it, catching on. “Is that—”

“An Infinity Stone. Specifically, the Power Stone. It was in the care of a planet called Xandar—thankfully, the same thing happened to it here as it did in my universe. It wasn’t easy, but once I was in a position to barter on behalf of Tolsar, I was able to trade for it. I had to prove to them that I could neutralize it, but once I did, they gave it to me.”

Tony frowns, somewhat taken aback by that statement. “What kind of position are you in that you can ‘barter on behalf of Tolsar?’”

“I’m the Queen of Tolsar,” she says plainly, then tilts her head. “Roughly translated.”

Tony’s trying to puzzle out the meaning of roughly translated, but Rhodey speaks up, the suspicion back in his voice. “I thought you said you were born on Earth, and from another universe. How do you get to be a queen of another planet? Marry into the royal family?”

She shakes her head. “The leaders of Tolsar are elected. It has nothing to do with family or marriage or any of that.”

“Leaders?” Rhodey demands, putting emphasis on the s at the end, and she nods.

“Tolsar has two elected leaders. King and Queen is usually what I hear them called, but I think
that’s mostly because there isn’t quite a comparable set of terms in English that my translator likes. They certainly don’t have to be male and female, and a lot of aliens out there don’t even have a gender binary like we do.”

“I don’t mean to sound rude,” Rhodey says, and Tony nearly cringes, because he’s using that tone he uses to tell Tony he’s being an absolute dumbass, “but you expect us to believe you were elected as the leader of an entire advanced planet? What are you, twenty-five? Six?”

At this, she actually looks a little bit annoyed. “Twenty-four, actually, when the Flare happened and I got my powers, which is when I assume I stopped aging.” She raises an eyebrow at the stunned looks on their faces. “What, did you think I abandoned the preparations for the fight with Thanos in my own universe to go looking for the gaps between realities, and that’s how I fell through to here?

“This might be a parallel universe to my own, but the time wasn’t the same when I crossed over. In my world, Thanos invaded Earth in 2018. When I crossed over into this universe, it was 2009 here… and 2040 in mine.”

The brief flash of defiance and stubborn pride on her face vanishes quickly, smoothed back over into the calm demeanor she had at the beginning of the conversation. She sighs. “I look young to any human, I know, and to many humanoids. But they aren’t exactly a majority in the galaxy, and people on Tolsar had no reason not to believe me when I told them my real age. I spent years proving myself here before I was asked to put forth my name when Aljri stepped down. I was elected queen here, and I immediately started reaching out to other planets, trying to find out how far Thanos had gotten here.

“I also started watching the Earth. It didn’t take long to see that up to a certain point, things were going almost exactly the same way here as they did in my universe. Thor had taken the Space Stone—the Tessaract—back to Asgard. The Mind Stone was on Earth, part of Vision after the whole Ultron thing. And the Time Stone was there, in the keeping of the sorcerers—the evidence is there if you know where to look. So I knew where at least three of them were, and that Thanos hadn’t had a chance to get his hands on any of the three.”

Tony sits forward on Rhodey’s bed, ignoring the pain in his ribs as he shifts. An important question has suddenly occurred to him. “If you got here decades after Thanos invaded in your universe, then does that mean you beat him?” He can’t help the pathetic note of desperate hope in his voice, but screw it. He is desperate. He’s been desperate since he saw that army on the other end of a portal, and now, hearing that in a parallel universe, Thanos invaded just two years from now, he’s even more desperate.

Tony lets out a huge breath when she nods. “Yes. In my universe, we stood against Thanos and his forces together with people from all around the world, and the galaxy, actually. Not exactly armies, but enough to engage his top people. It was… hard.” Here, something in her eyes changes, and if Tony wasn’t already convinced by the conversation, this would do it. He’s never seen anyone fake that faraway look of reliving serious, traumatic history. Battles that define your life.

“We were outnumbered, and mostly outgunned,” she says distantly. “And we lost people. We nearly lost the entire thing, but we managed to keep Thanos away from the Time Stone, the last one he needed, for long enough to get me to him. I ended up facing off against him, because my abilities were the best suited to it. I nearly died, and got everyone killed along with me, but in the end, I won. We won.”

She suddenly seems to shake herself, focusing back on the present. Her expression loses the faraway quality and becomes intense, passionate. “I’ve only grown since then. I’ve improved my
own control over my powers, and discovered facets to them that I didn’t know existed before. I
defeated him once, in my own universe, when I was new to this, young, and afraid. This time, it
won’t be so difficult. I will defeat him.”

Tony shares another glance with Rhodey, and this time, he can tell they’re on the same page. It’s
Rhodey who voices their skepticism. “Again, not to be rude, but you were just telling us that you
ended up in this universe because you got cocky and made a mistake. Kinda seems like that’s what
you’re doing right now.”

Her expression hardens just a fraction once more. “That was a completely different circumstance. I
have more assurances this time around that I’ll be successful. Also, I’m not doing this alone. I’m
not stupid enough to go charging in on my own, confident I can take him down. That’s why I’ve
been planning. I’ve been preparing our armies on Tolsar to fight him. I’ve been watching the Earth,
making sure I know what’s happening with the Stones there. And I’ve been working to protect—
and, where possible, bring together—individuals that I think will be vital in the effort against him.”
She tilts her head. “Hence this call.”

Tony blinks. “What?”

She gives him a look of such overwhelming familiarity that suddenly, he can’t disbelieve her claim
that she knows him, or at least a him from another universe. “Tony Stark. Comments about your
ego notwithstanding, you are one of the most qualified people on the Earth to face off against
Thanos. You’re intelligent, adaptable, creative, determined, and most of all, prepared to face alien
threats.” She looks from him to Rhody. “And James Rhodes, don’t think I’m discounting your
input here. Your experience with battle, your leadership skills, your ability to plan and adapt, and
your engineering background are pretty damn invaluable.”

Tony crosses his arms, still not understanding her point. “So you want me to prepare to fight
Thanos?”

She takes a breath and sits back once more. “I want you to continue preparing. It’s what you’ve
done so far, or at least what you’ve tried to do, but you’ve encountered obstacles at every turn,
from your team not believing you to that asshole Ross trying to screw everything up. Yes,” she
adds with a smile at the looks on their faces, “he existed and was just as big a pain in the ass in my
universe, too. I had the displeasure of dealing with him a few times when the government was first
getting involved in studying my powers.”

Tony shakes his head, trying to process all of this. “Okay, wait. You say that things have been
pretty much the same here so far as in your universe. So we can assume Thanos will eventually
invade Earth, trying to get the stones. Except you’ve been preparing to fight him, I assume before
that happens.” She nods. “And you want me to help with those preparations, except like you’ve
pointed out, no one believes me. I haven’t exactly had the best luck so far with preparing for
anything. So are you planning to come here and tell the UN that they need to believe the threat, or
what?”

“Ah.” She gives him another small smile. “I could, although I’d really rather not. Trust me, I’m
very familiar with Earth’s capacity for denial, and the political nightmare that trying to convince
them to work together at any point preceding a full-scale invasion would be.”

“So what did you have in mind?” Rhodey asks.

She takes another slow breath, smile replaced by seriousness once more. “Well, until recently, I
was planning to simply make contact and give you some ideas to implement there on Earth, just to
shore up the defenses, essentially, and then leave you to it.”
“But?” Tony asks. He can sense the ‘but.’

“But, something changed. I told you that things have been more or less the same here as they were in my universe, but that changed recently. About a week ago, in fact.”

Tony immediately tenses and feels Rhodey squeeze his hand again. She continues on, undeterred. “What the media called the ‘Civil War’ between the Avengers was a major turning point in my universe. For all of you, personally, but also for the future of the Sokovia Accords and the idea of superheroes on Earth in general. You, and the example you set, are probably the most important player on that board.”

Tony’s jaw is clenched against his will, so Rhodey again speaks for him. “And?”

“And, what’s happened to you in the last week isn’t the same as what happened in my universe. Siberia was the turning point.”

At that, Tony actually flinches, a painful, full-body twitch that has Rhodey running a soothing hand down his back and casting a dangerously dark look at the screen. Amilie, to her credit, does look apologetic. “I’m sorry, but there’s no avoiding the subject. What happened there was deeply personal to you, and it played an important part in your future as a defender of the Earth.”

She must see the apprehension on Tony’s face, because she adds, “I don’t know the details. You never told me, and I’m not asking you to tell me now. It’s not important. What’s important is the differences in what happened. In my universe, Tony Stark came back from Siberia on his own. Beat up, sure, and looking pretty pissed off, but he immediately set to work on getting around Ross to continue improving the Accords, making sure they were fair without being too restrictive. Still committed to the future, to making sure there were responsible systems in place.

“That didn’t happen here. You came back unconscious, and while you were out, Ross ran wild. His perverted version of the Accords is nothing like what I signed when I discovered my powers and agreed to work with the Avengers. He messed everything up, and I’m assuming that he was able to do that because you weren’t there to oppose him. Not only were you not there, in fact, but he used your injuries as an example, to further illustrate his fear and hatred of enhanced people and push others into agreeing with him.”

She pauses. “The other important difference in my world was that when the threat came, years after Siberia, the others came back. Rogers, Romanoff, Barton, Barnes, Maximoff, they came back with your blessing. Reluctant and wary, maybe, but you gave it. You didn’t have to be friends with them, but you were willing to work with them.”

Tony can practically feel his teeth cracking with how hard he’s grinding them together. The hand that’s not crushing Rhodey’s is clenched into a fist, nails digging into his own palm. She gives him a sympathetic look that grates on his nerves. “In my world, they definitely weren’t forced back on you immediately, like this. And whatever happened in Siberia—again, I’m not asking you to tell me—I get the feeling, from your condition if nothing else, that it was worse here than in my time.”

Rhodey makes an angry sound. “How do you know they’re coming back? Ross just told us that.”

She raises her eyebrows like it’s obvious. “I was listening in. I’d apologize, but like I said, it was an important conversation. Possibly vital to the future of Earth’s defense, and I’m pretty invested in that.” She looks back and forth between them. “And I got the feeling from that conversation that there’s not a chance in hell you’ll welcome them back and work with them again. You’re certainly not going to ask them to believe you now when they wouldn’t before.”
Tony finally recovers his voice. “So what’s the alternative? What are you offering?”

“Leave,” she says simply. “Come to Tolsar with me, both of you. Help me prepare for this fight.”

When they both sit there in shocked silence, she continues, a spark of excitement in her eyes. “Tolsaran citizens have to be approved, to prove they can contribute something to the good of the society. Usually that’s done through a record of their accomplishments in the past, like a resume. Knowing I might have this conversation someday, I provided the council here with evidence of some of the things both of you have done quite a while ago. You’ve both been provisionally accepted as citizens, if you want it.”

Tony can only gape at her, and he has a feeling Rhodey is doing the same. “Why?” is all he can ask.

She smiles. “Like I said, you were instrumental in fighting Thanos the first time. Both of you. I’d like you working with me again. Also,” and here her smile turns a little softer, “I worked with both of you long enough in my universe to consider you friends, I’d like to think. I don’t like the thought of leaving you to suffer here on Earth, in this crappy situation. Forced to be around people who hurt you and betrayed you, forced under Ross’s control, injured and—oh!”

Her eyes widen, and she suddenly stands from her seat, running out of sight of the screen for a minute. When she returns, she’s holding something small that she sets on a table next to her seat. Some kind of holographic screen pops up, and she taps a few things on it. “I’m sending this to your phone.” She glances up at Rhodey and smiles, then looks back down. “Plans for an assistive device that’ll let you walk again. I know very well Tony probably has something in the works already, and he might be able to make that faster than this one, but now there’ll be no need to work out the bugs once you can create this. I have no idea what any of it means, I told you I’m not a tech person, but I’m sure you can figure it out.”

Tony’s insides swoop uncomfortably, climbing up into his throat. She’s right, of course, he already has plans in his head for something to help Rhodey. But to have something advanced, without having to go through the inevitable trial and error that would come with testing and improving it…

“That’s…”

She finishes her typing and gives them both her full attention again, smiling when she sees their expressions. “If you choose to come here, we have people that can heal you completely, so you don’t even need a device to walk at all. But I’m not trying to blackmail or coerce you there. I can’t send those people there, but this is the best we have long-distance and it should work well for you if you prefer to stay.”

Tony sits for a minute, overwhelmed, and she thankfully lets him, staying quiet. Rhodey squeezes his nearly numb hand again, and they share a long look, trying to have an entire conversation without words. It’s both easy and hard.

“Thank you,” Rhodey finally says, looking away from Tony and back to her.

She just nods, so Tony is the one to ask, “When do you need an answer?”

She tilts her head again. “Well, based on the conversation you just had with Ross, I’d say about a week. Technically, I don’t need to know at any particular time. And if you do decide you want to stay for now, this isn’t a one-time offer. You can always contact me again. But it seems like you’re stuck going into a pretty intolerable situation, so if you’d like to have something to look forward to through that, well… the offer’s open.”
“What would we have to do?” Tony asks.

“Well, if you do say yes, I’ll have to officially pass on your request for citizenship. You have a provisional offer right now, but you need to be reviewed and then extended an actual offer. There are preparations that would need to be made on my end, and a few technical details you’d have to take care of. That’s pretty much it.” She chuckles. “Not to oversimplify moving to another planet, but, well, it’s not quite as complicated as you might think.”

Tony glances at Rhodey once more. “So how long would it take? I mean, I have some things here I’d want to take care of…”

Another smile. “The actual journey to Earth would take me about two weeks. Even if we took care of everything else as soon as possible, you’d have to wait at least that long for me to get there and pick you up. And I can delay leaving if you need me to. You’ll have as long as you need to take care of whatever you’d like.”

Tony sighs. This is all just… too much, but at least he has some information, and maybe a timeline. He can work with that. “Okay. So… okay. We can think about it. How do we contact you again?”

“You got a phone call before this projection started, just call that number back. It’ll connect back to me, or at least to one of my people, who will get it to me.”

She surveys them both for a minute. “I’ll leave you to think about it. I know this is a lot to put on you, all at once, and after another big shock, and I’m sorry about that. I do want to help you, but I understand how hard it is to just trust that I’m telling the truth and that I can help. So, before I go, is there anything else you want to ask me now?”

Tony has about a million and one questions, but he’s not sure he can even make sense of them right now. Before he asks her anything else, he really just wants to sit with Rhodey and have a long conversation. He wants another opinion, one he can trust. He numbly shakes his head.

Rhodey, though, sits up a little straighter, finally letting go of Tony’s hand to cross his arms one more time. “One thing.” She quirks an eyebrow in question. “What’s your bad story?”

She frowns. “My what?”

Rhodey doesn’t move, radiating that firm, commanding presence he commands when he’s really serious. “You say you’ve fought Thanos, and that it was a tough battle. Anyone who’s ever seen combat, or been in a war zone, has a moment that’s gone to hell and back. Something they regret, or at least keeps them up at night. What’s yours?”

It’s like Rhodey to go straight for something so intense, but it’s also smart, and it’s how Rhodey can really read someone, how he can tell if they’re telling the truth. Tony looks over at him, sees the calculating look on his face. And he’s reminded that Rhodey is the smartest, toughest, and wisest person Tony knows by far.

Amilie sits back at his question, and the haunted look that Tony recognizes returns to her face. She takes a long moment before answering.

“In the final fight against Thanos… there was a moment. We had him cornered, pretty much, but only for a second. It could all fall apart any minute. And if it did… we would lose. We were barely holding his forces off. And I had a chance to take him out.

“He knew it. And he knew us. Humans. He thought we were weak. Emotionally and physically. So… he took a hostage. Not just a random person, but one of us. One of the fighters. Someone I
knew, someone I fought alongside up until that point. He grabbed them, and held them up like a human shield. I couldn’t get to him without going through them. And he taunted me—all of us. Saying that we wouldn’t sacrifice one of our own.”

She pauses and takes a pained breath, closing her eyes for a moment. Tony’s about to ask what happened, though he has a dreadful feeling he knows the answer, but he doesn’t need to. She centers herself and looks Rhodey right in the eyes when she finishes her story.

“I did it anyway. His monologue to me was a weakness, an opening, and it might have been the only one we ever got. I attacked, and I went through my teammate to do it.”

She takes another deep breath, still never breaking eye contact. “I don’t regret it. I never have, not for a moment. But as for keeping me up at night? Yeah, it did, for a long time. I still think about it, every once in a while.

“Half the universe was at stake. That was the only real chance we’d gotten, and if I’d failed, if I’d hesitated, we might all have been killed, and the universe would have paid the price. I did what I had to do.

“But… I saw plenty of people die in that battle, and some of them were people I was friends with, people I’d fought with. But I wasn’t the one who killed them. This was different. I murdered an innocent person without a second thought to get to Thanos, and I’d do it again. That… well, I’m not sure it changed me, but it certainly opened my eyes to who I really was. I’ve never claimed to be a perfect person, and I’ve never been one to think in black and white, but that moment made it pretty clear. I’m certainly no fairy tale or action movie hero, and thinking of myself as one is nothing but childish idealism.”

Tony shudders at the darkness in her voice. He can’t judge. God knows he’s done enough awful things in his life, gotten innocent people killed for much less noble reasons than killing someone who was trying to wipe out half the universe. At the same time… he’s not sure he can imagine cutting through a teammate, a friend, without remorse to get to the bad guy. That takes a level of ruthlessness that Tony’s not sure quite how to define.

She’s right about one thing—nothing about fighting villains is ever like a fairy tale or an action movie. Things don’t wrap up well in the real world, with the heroes all saving the day, beloved by everyone, and getting everything they want, while the villains end up in jail or dead, all loose ends tied up. Real life is never that nice.

Rhodey studies her for a long moment, but eventually he nods. Tony’s not sure whether he believes her, and he certainly doesn’t trust her yet, not completely, but Tony knows she’s given them enough for Rhodey to be open to conversation. That’s all that Tony needs for now.

She wipes the drained look off her face and returns to her calm half-smile. “Call me again when you’ve made a decision, or if you need to talk more before you do. For now… thank you for listening. And good luck.”
Rhodey’s barely been in the Compound for ten minutes when Tony finds him. Tony’s been stuck here for the most of the last three days, whereas Rhodey’s just returned from another meeting with his superiors—former superiors, because he’s getting honorably discharged.

That was a hard one to accept. It took him days to get on board with this whole plan to begin with, and he still has the tiniest of doubts in the back of his mind. Really, it wasn’t until Tony managed to finish the upgraded braces that Amilie sent the plans for that Rhodey even started to believe her offer.

Naturally, Tony had him in his own version practically as soon as they were released from the hospital. They were far from perfect, but Rhodey could stand, and that was a miracle in itself. Still, it was clear from the moment he walked—if it could really be called that—into the room to meet with the Air Force higher-ups that he wasn’t going to be serving anymore.

If he was really planning to stay on Earth, he’d have fought to stay. He’d have told them that the braces would be improved, and that even if they weren’t, Tony would rewire the suit so that he could operate it even without the use of his legs. And he did hedge his bets at the beginning; he said there was a possibility he would recover in part, and that he’d like to keep his options open.

But less than a week after her call, Tony finished Amilie’s device and the difference was astounding. It was enough to finally convince Rhodey to really consider her offer. Tony’s poorly-concealed enthusiasm about the idea went some way toward convincing him, too, honestly.

He spent a long time thinking hard about the offer, and about himself and what he wanted out of this. He wasn’t about to give up his career and move to another planet just for Tony, as much as he loved him. He needed to want to do this for himself.

But Tony was a part of the decision, for sure. If Amilie had never contacted them, and they were forced to stay, they’d be miserable. Tony was determined to try to fix the Avengers and what Ross had turned the Accords into, which meant staying at the Compound, working with the scumbags who betrayed him and tried to kill him, and having to smile and shake hands with the man who murdered his parents.

Tony would be miserable. And Rhodey would stay, no question, to try to support him and also to keep going with his work as War Machine, which he truly believed in. But he’d be miserable too. One of his only bright points, probably for quite a while, would be Tony.

Adding in Amilie’s offer, if Tony left with her and Rhodey stayed behind, he wouldn’t even have Tony around to help take the sting out of all the bullshit that had been dumped on them recently. He’d have to deal with all of the disgraced Avengers on his own, plus Ross and his minions, and of
course navigate his injury.

The only reason he’d stay, really, would be to help protect and defend the Earth. At one point, that mission had just been his country—that’s why he joined the military to begin with. At some point, around the time Tony showed up with a metal suit, that expanded to include the entire world. There were threats on Earth that he couldn’t address from anywhere else, and of course, now they knew more about Thanos and the coming invasion. That was a major event that they needed to prepare for.

On the other hand, Amilie had told them she was capable of containing the Infinity Stones. On more extensive talks with her, they learned more about her and her offer. Her planet contracted with armies from around the galaxy, meaning they had the numbers to really fight Thanos. She had the resources to back up her claims, and she was willing to answer just about anything for them. It was clear that she was their best bet when it came to fighting Thanos. And in the end, he decided that he could do the most for his planet by sticking with Tony and going to Tolsar with Amilie.

Rhodey still didn’t quite trust her. But he did trust Tony. He didn’t necessarily trust Tony to be as critical as possible, or as suspicious as Rhodey himself, but he trusted Tony’s instincts. And he couldn’t blame Tony, who had it far worse when it came to the other assholes, for wanting to jump on a chance to leave while still being committed to protecting the planet.

Preparations are underway now. Amilie is arriving in nine more days, and sometimes Rhodey still has trouble accepting that he’s really going to just leave. He’s accepted his honorable discharge and the paperwork should be going through just before Amilie arrives to pick them up. He has occasional meetings with Tony’s lawyers related to canceling all of his contracts with the Avengers and everything that’s needed to make sure no one he cares about suffers when he leaves, but for the most part, they’re taking care of that for him and Rhodey doesn’t have to do anything. Amilie has assured him that his phone can be upgraded when he gets to Tolsar so that he can still contact his mother and anyone else he needs to.

Tony has way more to do. He’s more intensely involved with the Avengers, of course, though that’s the least of his troubles right now. Like Rhodey, Tony is mostly leaving everything to do with that to his team of lawyers. Their job is to make sure that when Tony tells his ‘teammates’ to go to hell and leaves in a week and a half, they can’t try to force any of the things they think they’re owed onto Pepper, Stark Industries, or anyone or anything else Tony cares about.

Meanwhile, he’s setting everything else up with Pepper. That’s been difficult, too, Rhodey knows. They’d been on a “break” before all the bullshit, but she was back when Vision brought him home from Siberia, and as soon as he was awake, she was telling him that she still loves him and wants to be together. Rhodey knows Tony is having a hard time believing it, but it doesn’t make it any easier for him to leave her.

She’s one of the few people who knows exactly what they’re planning. For obvious reasons, they haven’t told many. Even Tony’s legal team don’t know why Tony and Rhodey suddenly want to cut all ties with the Avengers, the government, and pretty much anyone and anything else they’re legally bound to. But they’re professionals and they’re doing their jobs anyway.

On the other hand, their friends and loved ones deserve to know where they’re going and why. Rhodey knows Tony’s been thinking about meeting with a reporter or somehow setting up a release of information for shortly after they leave, so that the whole world finds out the truth about the situation, but it wouldn’t be fair to let the people they care about find out that way.

Pepper was one of the first to know. Rhodey’s told his mother—not the details, but the fact that he’s moving somewhere far away and while he can call her and video chat, he might not be coming
back any time in the foreseeable future. Tony’s told Pepper and Happy, of course, plus both of the kids he adamantly refuses to acknowledge that he’s mentoring, Harley and Peter.

That’s the other big thing taking up a lot of Tony’s time. He’s arranged for all kinds of equipment to be sent to Harley Keener and his family, funds set up for them, and everything else Tony can think of to take care of them. He’s got a lawyer for the family, making sure that the kid doesn’t get dragged into any of the Avengers drama, since he’ll be tied to Tony now in a more obvious way.

Peter’s the more difficult one. Tony’s spent hours in meetings over the last week or so, talking with the new Accords Council and certain sympathetic parties within the UN. Doing it all while avoiding Ross is a delicate balancing act. So is convincing them to work with him at all, after Ross was so enthusiastic about creating the Council and getting that moron Rogers to pretty much sign away all his important rights to them without thinking.

But Tony has been gathering evidence and contacts for years. He’s had his eye on dozens of enhanced and other specialized people who might have been candidates for the Avengers, once upon a time. Now, after more than a week of arguing, Tony has managed to convince the Council that none of them will ever sign the bastardized Accords Ross mangled, and that the Earth won’t have them as defenders when they’re needed.

The next step has been negotiating a new, separate contract that’s less restrictive and more like what Tony envisioned the Accords could have been. In the future, Tony hopes, it will set a pattern for agreements for those individuals and others, in case they should want to defend the planet legally without having to hitch their wagon to Rogers and his crew. Right now, it’s mostly for Peter, who’s told Tony that he wants to keep fighting as a superhero, but has been explicitly warned against getting tangled up with the Avengers.

That was another difficult conversation, Rhodey knows. Peter’s young, and he idolizes Tony. And Tony has been very good at keeping up a façade for the public. Tony’s injuries after Siberia went a long way toward convincing Peter that Captain America is a very flawed, very dangerous man who’s not safe to be around, but the kid wants to fight. So far, he’s had the luck of only being involved in smaller, more local issues as Spiderman, and he hasn’t had any of those soul-crushing missions yet, the ones that take the shine off being a superhero.

It doesn’t help that he wants to be an Avenger, and Tony has done such a good job of keeping the public image of the Avengers relatively untarnished that even after fighting them in Germany, Peter had no idea of the extent of the Avengers’ internal problems. It was a difficult decision for both Tony and Rhodey, picking out what to tell the kid about the truth of the Avengers, in order to impress on him that it’s not a group he wants to be a part of, without revealing information they consider too personal or crushing poor Peter’s enthusiasm so intensely that he loses all desire to continue being Spiderman. They don’t want that.

Tony’s still working on it, but at least he has Peter convinced to wait for his contract negotiations with the Council. Hopefully something good will come of them. If it doesn’t, if Tony doesn’t have time before they leave to convince the Council of what he wants, he’ll leave his legal ream in charge of finding a good deal for Peter while avoiding the Avengers and Ross’s version of the Accords.

And neither of Tony’s kids will be alone. Pepper has now met both of them, and Tony’s fierce protectiveness has already rubbed off on her. She and Happy will make sure that they’re taken care of and that they’re not getting themselves into too much trouble—at least, not the kind of trouble the adults can help them avoid.

While all of this is going on, of course, Tony has the additional pressure of the formerly rogue
Avengers living in his damn Compound, coming back and practically waving their ‘victory’ in his face just by being here. Tony has to sleep in the same building as the man who killed his parents and the ‘friend’ who betrayed him. Not to mention the washed-up archer who hates him, the psychopathic witch who wants nothing more than to see him dead, and the backstabbing spy who sold him out in a critical moment. Lang and Wilson, too, but to Tony they’re little more than a footnote, just blind followers who, like most others, would rather trust Captain America without reason than listen to Tony’s logic.

Rhodey’s been lucky enough to avoid most of them so far, spending most of his time away from the Compound and in talks with the Air Force or Tony’s lawyers off-site. Plus, he still lives in his apartment away from the Compound. No one has bothered to ask whether he’s moving into the Compound, despite the fact that Rogers has decreed all Avengers need to live there—as though he has any right to claim Tony’s building as his domain—which just proves that the rest of the shortsighted bastards have written Rhodey off already. Yet another reason he’ll be glad to see their faces when they realize he and Tony are leaving the planet and leaving them with nothing.

He’s at the Compound now; he tries to come over whenever he can just to support Tony, who’s more stressed than ever through this process. The imminent prospect of their leaving is sustaining him, but it can only go so far. They’ve set up a little reminder system for themselves—mostly Tony—repeating the number of days until they leave to themselves and each other when things get particularly unbearable. If they just say the numbers, they can even do it in front of the others, so long as they don’t do it often enough for the assholes to realize it’s a countdown and start causing even more trouble.

He’s been sitting in one of the empty rooms in the east wing, where the others are thankfully not allowed, for about ten minutes when the door opens. It can’t be anyone Rhodey doesn’t want to see, but he looks up anyway, in time to see Tony slide into the room, shut the door behind him, and then lean against the wall, looking utterly exhausted.

His fists are clenched, the lines in his face more prominent than ever. He has about a hundred possible reasons for it, but Rhodey knows which one it is this time. There’s a certain air to Tony’s defeated yet incensed posture that only one person really puts there. “Rogers?”

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose and rolls his eyes, looking up at the ceiling. “Cornered me in the hallway.”

“What did he want?”

Tony laughs, completely humorlessly. “To ‘apologize’ to me.”

Rhodey grimaces. “Let me guess; no improvement over the last one.”

“Pretty much exactly the same. He wants me to ‘understand’ why he lied to me and beat the shit out of me. He wants me to stop blaming poor Bucky and get along with him. And, of course, to create some miracle technology so we can scrub the triggers and all the HYDRA memories out of the Russian Wonder’s head, so he can turn back into plucky Bucky Barnes and only I have to live with what he did.”

Tony delivers the last line with gritted teeth and Rhodey gets to his feet, coming over to put his hands on Tony’s shoulders. “Hey. Nine more days.”

Tony nods, letting his eyes close. “Nine more days. Can’t possibly come fast enough.”

Rhodey smiles this time. “Except for all the work you still have to do.”
Tony chuckles, forcing his eyes open again. “I could work forever and never be done. I think the time limit is a good thing. Forces me to just be done when she comes, and trust Pep and Happy and everyone else to take care of things from there.”

“Can you do that?” Rhodey doesn’t mean it to be insulting, but Tony has always had a hard time accepting help from others, and trusting other people to do something for him when he can’t supervise. He’s definitely a bit of a control freak, but more than that, his father beat it into him from a young age—perhaps literally, Rhodey was never sure but he has a pretty low opinion of Howard’s parenting skills just based on what he’s observed of Tony over the years—that needing help is a weakness, and accepting it means admitting defeat.

Tony thinks for a second, which at least tells Rhodey he didn’t take the question as an insult. “I do,” he eventually says. “I trust about three people in the world right now, and one of them is coming with me—” he gives Rhodey a genuine smile, which Rhodey returns happily— “so I need to leave everything else to the other two.”

Tony finally pushes himself away from the wall, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Nine more days.”

“Nine more days,” Rhodey repeats and follows as Tony opens the door and heads back out with his head held high. “We can do it.”

End Notes

Realistically, there's no way Tony and Rhodey would agree to just move to another planet after a single conversation. So they're going to have more, but this is the most important one. I'm skipping the rest of those though, the next chapter will be in the middle of the Moving Day story, when they've already agreed to move and are preparing for it.

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