In which Tony saves a life, saves the world, and sees the stars

by Skull_Bearer

Summary

The Avengers assemble. There is Loki. That's about all Tony, Steve and Rhodey can be certain about.

Notes

Thank you to oopsishipit for the beta.
The screen is dark for the moment. Pepper sits at the desk, drumming her nails.

“Why am I doing this again?” She looks up at Rhodey.

“Put it this way, if you don’t get him, SHIELD will. Who do you trust more?”

“Point.” Pepper sighs. “But at least they’d be the ones at ground zero if the worst happens.” She looks around the tower lovingly.

“Where’s Tony?” Rhodey checks his watch. “He won’t want to miss this.”

“I’m not rushing Tony.” Pepper growls. “You don’t rush a man cutting electrical cables at the bottom of the bay.”

“Particularly if cutting them might short out your tower, right?”

Pepper doesn’t dignify that with an answer, only straightening as a crack of light appears on the computer screen. “Here we go.”

The speakers crackle. “What the- who is this?” A massive hand blots out the light, the screen is blurred for a moment under the whorls of enormous fingertips.

“Good morning doctor Banner.” Pepper checks her hair, smiles as the fingers are taken away, and looks up into the broad, weatherbeaten face on the screen. “I believe it is morning in Kolkata?”

“Who are you?” His eyes narrow. Pepper feels her heart skip a beat- stupid, the worst Banner can do is smash the phone, and even that would take some doing, with that phone.

“Kolkata has excellent wifi connection.” Pepper continues smoothly. “And a lot of people with smartphones. We simply needed someone capable of parsing through all that information.”

“Charmed, I’m sure, Doctor Banner.” Jarvis puts in politely.

“I’d have thought, if you’d done all that research, you’d work out I didn’t want to be found.” Banner snaps.

“We know.” Pepper nods. “However, we thought we’d give you a heads up- you might be about to have company.”

Banner freezes, and the phone is close enough that Pepper can see the flash of green pass over his eyes. Then it’s gone. He looks at Rhodey. “Is it the military?”

“No,” Rhodey leans forwards so Banner can better see him. “It’s SHIELD. They’ve been hunting for- interesting people.”
“You can tell them I’m not planning to accept that.”

“We’re not SHIELD.” Pepper tosses back. “There’d be a lot more firepower if we were.”


“Not so much these days.” Rhodey crosses his arms, patiently.

“We’re a private, independently run organisation.” Pepper continues.

“Mercenaries.”

“Run and funded by Tony Stark.”

That stops Banner, he pauses.

“He’s mentioned something about a lab and extra funding.”

Banner is thinking about it. He takes a breath, calms.

“And between Iron Man and War Machine- if something were to happen, they would be best equipped to deal with it.”

“What do you want?”

“Honestly? At this point I think Tony just wants to piss off SHIELD. He’s building a team of—” Pepper rolls her eyes and sighs. “Superheroes.”

“Have you seen the other guy?” Banner shakes his head. “I’m not a hero, Ms. Potts.”

“That’s up to you. Unlike SHIELD, we’re not in the business of forcing people to do anything they don’t want to.”

“Where is this team?” Banner says finally.

“New York.”

“Forget it.” Banner looks about to snap the phone closed, but Pepper holds up her hand.

“Just a moment—”

“I said forget it, or didn’t you know what happened when I was in New York the last time?”

Pepper frowns, needled. Rhodey leans forwards, “What, are you afraid of levelling Harlem again?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Simply that you’re in an odd place if you want to keep people safe.” Rhodey’s face is calm, steady. “A city of nearly five million people?”

There is a moment’s silence.

“There’s state of the art labs here.” Pepper continues. “And people capable of keeping the Hulk away from civilians.”

He’s wavering, tempted.
“Tony’d like to meet you.” Rhodey grins. “He’s got all your papers.”

“Are you calling Banner?”

Tony lands with a click, the armour melting off him as he walks. He sidles over and leans down so the screen catches him too. “Hey there Doctor. Loved your last paper. The anti-electrum collisions? Totally awesome. And I am entirely amazed with how you managed to deal with those assholes at Harvard without flattening the place.”

Banner is trying to suppress a smile, but it’s pulling at the side of his mouth. “I didn’t turn into the other guy, at that time.”

“And you were never tempted to go back there and break it a bit for old time’s sake?” Tony grins, throws himself in the chair beside Pepper. “You know they tried to withdraw my diplomas when I came out as an Omega? Fuck those guys.”

“It is sometimes tempting.” Banner mumbles. “At least you got to hide.” There is a flash of anger there. Green.

“Yeah well, I had my reasons.” Tony interlaces his fingers behind his head, leans back. “Anyway, how about it? They’re cute digs, and I have to share them with two Alphas and a Beta.” Pepper gives him a sharp look. “Come on, wanna help me redress the balance? We can’t leave everything in the hands of knots-for-brains.”

“Please remind me why I agreed to this.” Rhodey scowls down at him.

“Oh, don’t be like that honeybun, sweetcheeks, pookiepie.” Tony turns theatrically to Banner, mouths save me now with wide eyes.

Somehow- and Pepper could never explain, it’s working. It always works and she can never figure out how. Banner is really smiling now.

“No cages?”

“Say, Rhodey, how did cages help with the Hulk before?” He looks at Rhodey, who winces. “Yeah, that seems like a bad idea.”

“Do you want me to come to you?”

“Um.” They all look up, Steve steps out of the lift, looking awkward. “There’s a team of about twenty SHIELD agents outside.” He shifts. “I told them to go away.”

“And they did that?” Rhodey looks impressed.

“Phil Coulson was there.” He looks down at his feet.

“Agent has a name?” Tony blinks. They ignore him.

“Sir?” Jarvis breaks in. “They are attempting to hack into the Tower mainframe.”

Oh hell no. Pepper gets up, her skin almost steaming with rage, but Tony gets there first. “Jarv? Give him the old GLaDOS routine and fire off the tear gas if they won’t clear off.”

“A pleasure.”

“Can-” Steve points at the ceiling to indicate Jarvis. “Could they hurt him?”
“No.” Tony scowls. “But fuck them if they try.”

Steve nods.

“The agents have retired across the road and have stopped attempting to break into the systems.” Jarvis reports. “However, Agent Coulson asks to be allowed entry.”

Steve looks at Pepper. Everyone else looks at Steve. “What?”

“It’s you they’re after.” Pepper says softly. “We won’t let them in if you say no.”

Rhodey nods. Tony turns to Banner. “See? Top of the line, makes more sense security. C’mon, don’t you wanna see what happens if Ross tries to get in? He’s way dumber than these guys.”

Banner is trying to hold back laughter now.

Steve looks up.

“This is entirely up to you, Captain.” Jarvis’ voice is still stiff. Pepper winces. She had hoped they’d all gotten over that particular shit-storm, but apparently there are still hard feelings.

“Then- okay.” Steve takes a breath. “If it’s just him.”

“There’s you and Pepper and we’ve got the suits on hand.” Tony shrugs. “We can take one agent.”

Pepper gives him a look, but doesn’t correct him.

“Sorry, who are you?” Banner is still peering through his phone at Steve, looking lost.

Steve looks at him, blinks, takes a deep breath. “Captain America. Nice to meet you Doctor Banner.”

“Right.” Banner blinks. “What?”

The lift opens. Phil Coulson is as calm and controlled as ever. “Ms Potts.” He nods at her with a genuine smile. “Stark.” Tony lifts one shoulder. “Colonel.” Rhodey nods.

His eyes settle on Steve. Steve doesn’t meet his eyes. He looks ashamed. “Captain.” There’s world of disappointment there. “It’s- good to see you.”

Pepper hasn’t seen a guilt trip this bad since her mother called her last Christmas. And that was ugly.

“It’s a shame that-”

“Okay, fuck you.” Tony steps forwards. “If you give us another load of passive aggressive crap you can take a very long walk that way.” Tony points at the Iron Man landing strip.

“Tony-“ Steve looks up pleadingly. “They had to. They couldn’t tell anyone the truth.”

“Yep, and that was fucking stupid.” Tony scowls at Phil. “But that doesn’t explain why they locked you down for weeks with no news, no pay and fucking cafeteria coffee.”

“SHIELD had reasons. “

“SHIELD always has reasons. SHIELD has brilliant reasons. Right now, SHIELD must have a reason why you can just fuck right off-“

“How about you tell us your reason for stealing Captain America.”
“Sorry? We can steal people now? How is that even legal? I mean, I get he’s a national treasure, but that doesn’t mean you can lock him in a vault—“

“I am right here you know—“ Steve tries.

“Okay.” Tony steps back. “What d’you want to say then?”

Steve looks at Coulson. Rhodey takes a step up beside him, Pepper closes ranks on the right. Coulson looks at the group of them and sighs, but there’s something almost wistful there.

“How about you tell us what this is about?” Steve says finally.

“So,” Tony rubs his forehead, checking its tensile strength in anticipation of testing it in comparison to the nearest wall. “I would like to say something. Can I face something, absolutely anything- and I’d take the Hulk, no offence Bruce—“

“None taken.”

“Basically, can I face something trying to kill me that doesn’t have anything to do with my fucking dad?”

“This isn’t about you, Stark.” Coulson frowns, although it’s a bit sympathetic- he’s probably almost as sick of it as Tony is, by now.

“Um- sorry. How isn’t it about me? He finds some homicidal cube and you decide to do whatever the fuck with it and now some god’s stolen it and run off with half your staff?”

That seems to about cover it. Coulson doesn’t look impressed. “We thought it could be harnessed. Unlimited free power.”

“You should have thrown it back.” Steve says flatly.

“He was trying to find you.”

Steve stops, opens his mouth. Tony holds up four fingers. Howard Stark memorial hour stops now. He closes his mouth. “It should have stayed there.”

“Well, it didn’t, and now some god from Asgard has run off with it.” Tony blinks, he’s never heard Agent snap like that, and at Steve. “And thanks to Stark making off with most of the Avengers team, we’ve come to you.” He looks at them. “Is this just a game to you Stark? Or did you actually mean it, when you promised world peace?”

“Whoa.” Tony blinked, “Did that cube insult your Omega or something—“

“He stole him.” Coulson suddenly hisses, and Tony takes a step back, Coulson’s face is suddenly so angry, so desperate, that it’s almost painful to look at. “That god is controlling him and took him away and I want him back.”

Tony blinks, “Oh-kay.” He looks around.

Rhodey shrugs. “I’m good to go.”
Then Steve, he sighs. “This is my fault. You wouldn’t have the cube if he- if it wasn’t for me.”

Pepper pinches the bridge of her nose. “I’ll monitor things for here. Someone needs to make sure the tower doesn’t explode.”

Tony looks at Banner. “Wanna come?”

“I- don’t think that’s a good idea.” Banner looks somewhat confused. He’s looking at Steve with a very strange look. “Unless you want it smashed.”

“Smashed is good.” Tony agrees. Steve nods.

“Actually, we were hoping to bring you in for your scientific capacity, doctor.” Coulson says, taking a deep breath and suddenly calm again. “The cube is emitting substantial gamma radiation, and we were hoping for your expertise in tracking it.”

They look at Banner. He’s looking a bit lost. Tony knows that look. That ‘this is insane but there’s no way I’m walking away now’ look. He’s in too.


Banner’s heading to the Helicarrier. The rest of them are off to fight a god. Steve would like to say it surprises him, but frankly at this point he’s gone beyond surprise to a sort of permanent, bone deep mild amazement. He’s in the black jumpsuit Tony made for him, it’s not his old outfit, but it’s sturdy, light and fast. It’s good enough.

“Do we know anything about this guy?” Rhodey leans over to Coulson, who shakes his head.

“His name is Loki. He seems to use some kind of magic but beyond that-” He shakes his head.

“I hope you weren’t kidding about having Gandalf on staff-” Tony grumbles.

“Agent, magic is not something we’ve trained for.” Rhodey overrides him smoothly.

“You are supposed to be a team who can do things that no one can train for.”

Rhodey rolls his eyes at Steve, he rolls them back. Civilians. “Okay. Let’s try double tag. I’ll fly diversion- get his attention. Tony, Steve, you take him out. Maybe between the two of you we can deal with whatever he throws at us.”

Steve nods slowly. “If he has the Tesseract- Schmidt had weapons. They were-“ he shakes his head, the words lock behind his teeth. He isn’t sure they’d be sufficient even if he could get them out.

“Warn us if you see anything you recognise.” Rhodey nods.

Coulson stares rather fixedly out of the window before suddenly perking up. “Which reminds me.” Coulson reaches under his seat. “Captain? You left this behind.”

He takes it out, and Steve’s heart stutters. He holds out a hand more out of instinct than deliberate action, and closes slow, tentative fingers around the rim of his shield. The breathless non-weight of it. The smooth chill of the metal warming to his body heat. The paint as bright and shining as the day
they set off on that last mission.

He looks up, everyone is staring. “Sorry.”

“No problem, big guy.” Tony grins, and slaps his shoulder. “You cuddle that comfort blanket.”

Steve scowls, but- well, he can’t really argue with that, and runs his fingers over the edge of the shield, over and over. Feeling every burr and imperfection of the paint, testing the new micro-balance.

“Well, at least you won’t be throwing your guns away now.” Rhodey sighs. Steve’s cheeks flush. It was only twice. “Anyway, double tag, do you copy?” The words slip out unintended.

“Copy that.” Steve smiles.

“Roger.” Tony grins.

It doesn’t hurt so much to hear the joke- it’s personal now, and he can take those.

“We’re over Germany now.” Coulson glances at Steve, “Will you be-“

Steve bats it away. “Hard to get nostalgic for a bomb site.” He gets up. “Are you dropping us off?”

“It’ll be easier to go under the radar in the suits.” Tony gets up. The faceplate locks down and- it’s a strange feeling. Maybe it’s the way his scent suddenly cuts off, the impassive blue glow of those eyes. “Hop on, Cap.”

Steve gets up, smiles at Coulson. “You’ll pick us up?”

“We’re holding position.” Coulson nods. He looks at Steve and there’s an odd sort of smile on his lips, a little wistful, a little proud. Steve feels a stab of guilt for leaving SHIELD so suddenly.

“See ya later Sir.” He smiles. The small slots open on the armour, Steve takes hold with one hand, fits his feet in the slots on Tony’s back.

He hangs on as Tony stomps, a little unsteady with the new weight, over to the open doors. “Hanging on?”

“Ready.” Steve nods. They look over at Rhodey. He’s entirely enclosed in the heavy, grey-metal suit, he nods. They jump.

The wind catches Steve in the throat, fights to cut through the heavy kevlar of his suit. The metal of the shield chills to ice under his fingers. The world is featureless, confused black for a moment, clammy dampness in his throat. He fights the urge to reach for a parachute.

Then they’re through the clouds. An explosion of golden light meets them. Night light cities, a Germany that no longer needs a blackout. It’s like the Times Square Christmas Tree, the size of the entire country.

Steve is smiling. He isn’t quite aware of it at first, but it’s there. It’s beautiful. It’s a pretty substantial improvement on the Germany of his time. Maybe if he’d woken up here instead of New York, he’d be feeling a bit better about the future.

Tony throws back his arms as they fall, the blue blast of the repulsors kick through the suit and Steve tightens his grip as they fall- fly, they’re flying, he’s flying, surfing on the back of Iron Man and he can see Rhodey’s outline glimmering beside them.
“Hanging in there?” Tony’s voice comes through the comms.

“Yeah.” He breathes. Below, the tangles of light resolve themselves into linked pools. He can see the cars inching along them, tiny beetles. “This is amazing.” It slips out without his intending it.

“Hah! Told you he’d love it Rhod.” Tony loops in the air. Steve holds his breath, stomach revolving as though he’s riding the Coney Island roller-coaster, then barks a laugh as they level out again. “Liked that?”

“Stay on the mission.” Steve tries to be stern, but he’s smiling too much. “Later.”

“Hell yeah.”


Steve leans over Tony’s shoulder, looking down.

A bright island of light blooms below them. It’s packed with people, kneeling down in front of- some guy. Tony’s moving so fast it’s hard to focus on him. But he’s holding something silvery and sharp, and pointing it at a man, a man standing alone in the crowd. Steve tightens his grip on the shield, shifts his weight.

Tony turns his head. “Steve?”

Rhodey breaks in. “Okay, Tony- drop Steve behind him and engage from the front. I’ll run perimeter and try and distract him-“

The man’s spear glows blue. Steve draws in his breath, lets go of his handholds, and kicks off Tony’s back.

“Steve!”

“Ah crap.”

Steve ignores the echoes in his headset, and throws up the shield to block the blast, hoping it’ll be good against magic.

The shield rings like a bell under the blow, but holds. Steve pushes the old man down hard, and looks up.

The ricochet’s knocked the spear-guy down. Steve gets up. He tries not to look up to see what Rhodey and Tony are doing. “I’m the distraction.” He breathes softly into the microphone, before walking slowly towards the man.

“Got it.” Rhodey sounds grouchy, but at least he doesn’t complain- he can roast Steve later, but now they have work to do. “Tony, you engage on the right, I take the left.”

“Oh, so Steve can just mess up the plan-“

Steve tunes them out. He starts shouting, not really paying attention to what he’s saying, just keeping this guy’s attention on him.

He has it. He’s grinning. His spear is pointed at Steve. “Kneel before me.”

Steve touches his earpiece. “What’s this clown’s name again?”
“Loki.” Tony lands behind the man. He starts, turns. “Not even one of the better known clowns.” He lifts his hand. The man turns his spear to him-

Steve throws the shield. Tony blasts Loki, Loki’s spear blazes blue.

The spear and repulsor blast hit and burst in a explosion of white and blue aftershadow. The shield hits Loki in the back of the head and neatly knocks his helmet off. Rhodey drops to Loki’s five and takes aim. “Best laid plans and all that?”

“They never survive contact with the enemy.” Steve shrugs apologetically.

Loki staggers. Rhodey steps over and hammers him over the head with both hands. Loki drops like a stone.

“That was easy.” Tony prods the guy with his boot. “My kid robots fight better.”

Loki turns his head. Under the mouthful of gravel, he’s smiling.

“That was too easy.” Tony huffs.

“Stop complaining, Stark.” Romanov glares at him from the pilot’s seat.

“Sorry, why are you here?” Tony, glances at her. “Shouldn’t you be sucking up to Pepper? The toilets could do with more polish.”

She doesn’t answer, turning back to flying. Tony glances back at Loki, at the back of the plane.

“Is she with you?” Romanov’s voice makes him start.

“Um- no. You try and get her out of that tower, it’s like her firstborn.”

“She should be here.” Romanov continues softly. “We need her more than you.”

Tony rolls his eyes, and tries to ignore her. Thankfully Rhodey and Steve aren’t listening, they’re having enough problems with Coulson.

“Where is he?” Coulson snarls. His fingers are gnarled, twisting, knotting over and over into the tie he has actually pulled off.

Loki just laughs. “I have no idea where your little catamite is.”

Coulson’s jaw works. He bares his teeth and- whoa, Tony is not going there. The wash of threat and rage coming from Coulson is all the more staggering after how completely controlled the guy’s been. Steve is the only one brave enough to put a hand on Coulson’s shoulder, and he turns like a whip, ready to spring.

“Easy there.” Steve’s voice is calm, even. “You can’t do anything like this.”

Coulson draws in a breath, then seems to just- deflate. Tony feels a flash of sympathy for him. He slumps down on the seat beside Rhodey and just sags there.
Tony shifts over beside him and pats his arm. It’s- not something he knows. But he thinks of Pepper when he thought Stane was after her. He thinks of how he would feel if this sadsack emo goth had her. He thinks of how he’d feel if he had Rhodey, or Jarvis. Or Dummy.

“Wow.” Tony leans forward towards Loki. “You know, I thought you guys were like- Space Vikings. Amazing warriors and everything. Because that? That was pathetic. I’ve fought kittens that were more of a threat. Your friends must be really embarrassed.”

That seems to have an effect. Loki shifts. Tony smiles. So, you think you’re annoying...

“I mean, no offence Rhodey.” Tony nods at him, “Your plan was great- or would have been, if Cap hadn’t decided to improvise. But I’m pretty sure we could have walked in with ticker tape and sparklers and he’d still have wet his pants.”

Loki’s eyes flash, his jaw works. Yeah, get angry.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Tony turns to Rhodey. “Remember when we were called out on that battery and riot charge that turned out to be a bunch of drunk LARPers?”

Rhodey grins. Steve shakes his head in despair for the twenty-first century.

“So yeah, you can’t actually beat six drunk seventeen year olds with rubber swords.” He pats Loki’s head. “Good little dictator.”

“Do not touch me.” He hisses through gritted teeth. “Do you know who you speak of?” He’s angry, it smells of old ice, rotted snow. There’s a pretty strong scent of Omega there too, and Tony files that away. He maybe feels a bit of sympathy for the guy, it’s not fun having to prove yourself all the time. All the same, mind control and eighty dead means that sympathy isn’t really high priority.


“I am Loki, prince of Asgard.” He grits out, like he’s trying to convince himself.

“And I am King Arthur of Camelot.” Tony turns to Rhodey. “Giveth me my great sword Excalibur, Sirs Morien and Lancelot.”

“You know those stories?” Steve looks up.

“Love them.” Tony looks back at Loki. “You’re not on Asgard or whatever the hell that is. You’re on Earth. Our patch So Drunk LARP Kitty it is.”

Coulson is actually looking impressed. Probably he’s never seen such precisely targeted douchiness, and Romanov- Romanov is looking at Loki, very closely. She meets Tony’s eyes for a moment. Go on, she mouths.

Uh- okay. He’d thought he’d be told to shut up by now.

“You have no idea what is coming.” Loki snarls. “Oh, but you’ll see it.”

Then he smiles. It’s horrible. It actually checks Tony, because he knows that smile. It’s- not a good smile. It’s a- everything is so fucked and broken that watching it all burn down is the best I can hope for smile. Tony knows that smile. He’s seen it in the mirror. “I’ll see you bow.” Loki breathes. “I’ll see you on your knees before they kill you.”

“That’s what they all say.” Tony steels himself, and forces him to give Loki another patronising pat
on the shoulder. “They’re all dead now. Do you have anything you want me to say at your funeral? People tend to ask me to speak.”

Loki looks at him. His eyes are flat and dead. There isn’t anything he can say that could be a threat. Not to him. Whatever happens, he’s seen much, much worse.

As if on dramatic cue, lightning flashes.

The glazed look in Loki’s eyes shatters, and he suddenly looks at once embarrassed, and worried.

The huge guy with the hammer punches Tony, grabs Loki, and is gone in about five seconds flat. “Oh for fuck’s sake.”

Tony gets up. “Are we going to let him do that?” His eyes are blazing, even under the armor, Rhodey can read the taut lines of his body, the edge in his voice, the faint scent of tension and stress from the open faceplate. He’s on a hair trigger.

“Who was that?” Steve steps up. “Is he like-“ he points at the empty space where Loki had been.

“He knows where the Tesseract is.” Coulson storms forwards, might have gone straight out of the plane without a parachute if Steve hadn’t stopped him. “We need him! They can’t just take him back to Asgard-“

Rhodey makes his decision. “Steve, you’re on Tony. We’re going after them.”

“Is that wise?” Natasha looks back at them. “They’re basically gods.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that.” Rhodey puts on his helmet. Tony barely waits for Steve to crampon before blasting out of the open hatch. Rhodey swears and dives after them.

“Do not engage!” He calls as they drop through the roaring thunderstorm. “Repeat, do not engage! Do you copy?”

“Copy.” Steve repeats in his ear. “Tony?”

“All right.” Tony growls. “But that guy’s trouble.”


“Don’t know.” His voice is terse. “He’s not all there. Don’t want to know where he is. It isn’t a good place.”

Well, Tony would know about bad places if any of them did. “Copy.” He agrees. “Down, two o’clock.”

“Oh it.” The flashes of lightning are pretty obvious.

“Stay at a fifty yard perimeter.” Rhodey warns. “Let’s not get in a fight if we don’t have to.”

They drop down behind a clump of trees. Loki and the other guy don’t seem to have seen them. Rhodey waves and they stumble forwards. These suits are not made for recon. “Steve, can you get
closer? We’re a bit obvious.”

“Got it.” Steve ducks from rock to bush to tree. “They seem pretty busy.”

Rhodey nods, they can hear the shouting from here. They shuffle a bit closer. Steve’s voice comes through the comms. “Can you see the other guy- the one who took Loki?”

Rhodey focuses on him, the suit viewers zoom. “Big beardy blond?” Tony comes in.

“That’s him. I think he was in one of the briefings SHIELD gave us. Thor.”

Tony drops down and scoots as low as he can under the bush to join Steve behind a large rock. Rhodey sighs and joins them. Loki is only a few feet away. “You need the Tesseract to take me home, but I have sent it off I know not where.”

“Brother, don’t do this—”

Rhodey looks at Steve and Tony. “Anyone else getting ‘trap’ from this?” He sends through the private channel.

“Yeah, sorry to insult your planning, Rhodes, but there was no way he wasn’t planning to get caught.”

What now? “I hope Banner is having more luck tracking the Tesseract from the Helicarrier.”

“Do what?” Loki laughs, high, manic. It reminds Rhodey, horribly, of Tony. Tony six months ago. Tony dying. What the hell is wrong with this guy? “Take my rightful place? Take the honours you have denied me?”

Tony puts a finger to the side of his helmet, twirls it. Rhodey is inclined to agree.

“No, I have seen true power. Power that makes the Tesseract seem puny.”

“He isn’t mad.” Steve points out. “He’s terrified.”

“I will show them this power, the people of this world. I will show them obedience, true fear! I will rule them!”

Now he’s said it, Rhodey can see it too. The skin far too pale, the wild hollows under his eyes, the sweat dragging at his dark hair. “That’s not good.”

“You think?” Tony turns. “Look at him, even he doesn’t believe this crap.”

“You are blinded.” Thor shakes his head. “Blinded by power and your own foolishness.”

“Blind?” Loki laughs again, “Which of us failed to notice we are being watched?”

Thor spins around. Steve, Rhodey and Tony shrug and step out from behind their frankly pathetic hiding place. “Really nice of you to stand up for us.” Rhodey looks at Thor. “But we can take it from here.”

“Who are you, warriors?” Thor’s eyes are narrowed. His fingers tighten on the handle of a great hammer. Lightning rumbles ominously.

“As you’re on our planet, we should be asking who you are.” Tony steps up beside him.
“I am Thor, God of thunder-“

“We know.” Steve looks at Tony. “He was just making a point. This is our world, and those are our people he’s been taking.”

Thor looks between them. He’s suspicious, but they can work with that. “Unless you’ve got a better idea about what to do with him,” Rhody waves at Loki. “Come with us. You can make sure he’s kept secure, and if you know anything about the Tesseract, we could use your help.”

After all, having an actual god onside definitely helps.

Loki doesn’t say anything for the rest of the flight. Tony shifts uncomfortably. He could blame it on sitting next to Thor, who, unlike Loki, just smells weird. All ozone and rain and some surreal musk undertone his brain has no idea what to do with. It’s not Alpha, it’s not Omega, it’s not even Beta. It’s like nothing Tony’s ever smelled before. It’s utterly alien.

But that’s not the worst. That’s Loki.

Tony can’t keep his eyes off him. He’s smiling. Tony knows that smile. He knows that stance, that tension in his shoulder. He knows the way Loki’s hands keep flitting to his clothes, hand to hand. How his eyes never stop moving. The smell of fear, clinging to him and smelling like old, bad ice. The kind you think is okay until you walk out on it and realise it’s too late.

He’s scared out of his fucking wits. And Tony knows that because he’s been scared like that once—well, probably more than once, if he’s counting ’91, but he doesn’t like to think of that if he doesn’t have to, and anyway the reminder that’s really sticking out is Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, after he’d been blown up and he woke up with a car battery in his chest and the Ten Rings breathing down his neck and no destrogel and his body slowly counting down around him. Terrified until he’d thought his body was about to shake to pieces around him. And he’d had Yinsen to calm him down.

Loki doesn’t have anyone. Tony looks around, wonders who his Ten Rings are. Somehow he doesn’t think it’s SHIELD. Someone’s got him by the throat, and is squeezing so tight he’d do anything to get away.

And oh fuck does Tony know that feeling.

Normally, he’d have Jarvis on the case, but unfortunately the internet probably doesn’t stretch to what terrifies ancient Norse gods.

“So,” Tony leans over Thor, tries to ignore the vague sense he’s far too close to a thunderstorm. “Once you’ve taken over Earth, what’s your next plan?”

“He will not.” Thor grumbles.

“Shh, I wanna hear.” Tony smiles, turns the helmet over in his lap. “What’s it gonna be? Riches? Are you going to take all our best paintings and gold and diamonds and shit? Should I warn the Queen of England to save you the crown?”
“What would I do with your pathetic mortal trinkets?” Loki scowls.

“Okay then, ego? Are we all going to be building statues and singing songs to his great horniness? Oh- sex! Is it sex? The right of first night for the whole of Earth? Man, are you going to be busy—“

“Be silent.” Loki snarls. Tony doesn’t have to look at Natasha, watching intently from her seat, to know. He hasn’t the first fucking clue.

“Well, you’re going to have tons of time to make up your mind about that.” Tony leans back, “Top of the line SHIELD accommodations. Steve can tell you all about that.”

Steve seems about to say something, but they’re docking. A hoard of masked goons are hurrying over to escort Loki out and Steve stiffens, his hands snatch at his shield, and he smells of sudden adrenaline. Tony glances at him, he relaxes a little, and shakes his head, very slightly.

“Doctor Banner is in his laboratory.” Coulson puts in before Tony can ask what that was about, “We would appreciate your help in tracking down the Tesseract. We will call you to observe Loki’s interrogation.”

And doesn’t that just ping the wrong way? Tony gets up stiffly, watching Loki get marched away. It’s irrational. This guy’s killed a whole bunch of people and mind-fucked who knows how many more. And yet- and yet-

“Do you get the feeling they aren’t the good guys?” Steve mutters to him softly, falling into the step beside him.

Tony looks at him sharply. “They called us in.” Rhodey whispers, on Steve’s other side. “They must have had a reason.”

“I’d really like to know what it is.” Steve glances around, the faceless, masked goons marching Loki away. “They look-“ He leans forward, speaking even more quietly. “They look like Hydra.”

They do. It’s creepy. “Here’s a fun question,” Tony murmurs back, “What do you think they were really trying to do with the cube?”

“Unlimited free energy?” Rhodey throws back, but he’s also frowning, uncertain.

“That’s my job.” Tony shakes his head. “We’re rolling out the arc reactors next year. They know that- we’ve hardly kept it quiet. Why do they suddenly need another source of free clean energy?”

*Because they know they can’t weaponise yours.*

It doesn’t smell any better later, after Loki is in prison, and Thor explains a bit more. “These Chitauri,” Tony leans on the table. “Any chance they’re going to- you know, leave, when they’ve made Loki god-king of Earth?”

Thor gives him a sharp look. “They will have the Tesseract, I believe this was their deal.”

“Are they going to do it?” Natasha frowns at Thor. “From what you know of them, is it likely?”

Thor hesitates. “Asgard has feuded with them before. There is... no love lost between us.”

“So, they hate you guys, they’ll have an artifact of amazing power, and then they’ll leave because... they pinky swore, cross their little alien hearts?” Tony raises an eyebrow.

“Does it matter?” Thor frowns. “We will not allow this to happen, whatever they plan.”
Tony looks at Rhodey, he nods. Looks like they’ve discovered what Loki was so scared of.

“Even he doesn’t believe they’re going to let him rule.” Natasha says softly.

“Do you think you’re going to get him to change sides?” Banner leans forwards and- okay, Tony can’t help it, he smiles. It’s just so damn nice not to be the only Omega in a room. He loves Rhodey and Pepper, but sometimes it’s just really relaxing to be around someone like him. Just being seated next to him untangles some knot of nervous tension.

“Worth a try.” Tony shrugs. “I don’t think he’s going to tell us anything otherwise.”

“Tony.” Rhodey is looking at him, he’s half smiling, sorta sad. “I know you want to save everyone, but he killed eighty people.”

Tony looks down at his hands. He’s killed people too. And if the Ten Rings had been able to get enough of a hold over him to actually get him to build them weapons- it would have been a hell of a lot more than eighty.

“It’s leverage.” Natasha gets up. “It’s something we can use.” She looks at Tony. “Come with me.”

They all look at her. “You get under his skin. Get him talking- you can try and convince him to come to our side if you want- but we need to get something out of him.”

Tony hesitates, looks at Rhodey. He shrugs. “It’s worth a try. We’ll try and help Bruce get a lockdown on the Tesseract if it doesn’t work out.”

Tony nods. He takes out his phone and, after a moment, hands it to Steve. “Call Jarvis to help you out.”

The military has ties to SHIELD, if they’re going to crack SHIELD’s security, best if Rhodey has plausible deniability. He’s looking conspicuously at the ceiling, humming absently. Tony turns and follows Natasha out.

“Just continue what you were doing before.” Natasha falls into step with him. “Keep annoying him. You won’t see me.”

And just like that, it’s like she just- goes. There isn’t anything noticeable, just an immediate lack of Natasha. He looks around at the empty corridor. “Never teach Pepper how to do that.” He’d never sleep again.

He never built this cell. Tony looks curiously at the great Plexiglas and steel cell. Loki looks back at him. At least he looks okay. Waterboarding is classified as torture, but- well, the US has a reputation. Tony waves. “Hey Drunk Kitty.”

“My name is Loki.” Is all he gets back.

“Aww, you’ll always be Drunk Kitty to me;” Tony smiles as the man’s face twitches. “Remember how we handed your ass to you back in Stuttgart? Happy days.”

“What do you want?”

“Just wanted to continue our chat from earlier.” Tony leans on the railing between them. “So, once we’re all bowing to you and grovelling and kinky shit like that- what’s the big plan? Your Chitauri friends gonna throw you a big parade?”
He gets a dull stare back. “Thor should learn to keep quiet.”

“I’ve known that guy half an hour and I can already tell you that isn’t happening.” Loki’s lip curls. “And I’ve known you three hours and do you know what isn’t going to be happening?”

“I’m sure you are about to boast about the security of your cage, you put so much faith in your pathetic technology.”

“And you’re putting a hell of a lot of faith on your new friends.” Loki turns his back on him. “They aren’t your friends, are they? You don’t really think they’re going to leave when you give them the Tesseract.”

“They promised they will give me this world.” Loki’s hiss is soft enough Tony wouldn’t have caught it if it wasn’t for the microphones.

*Build it and we will let you go.*

*No, they won’t.*

“And you really trust them? I mean, really? Evil aliens even you don’t like.”

Loki’s teeth grind. “They are my willing tools.”

Tony blinks because- *wow.* “If you really believe that, then we need to get you some nice crayons and a colouring-in book because you are naive as a three year old. You wanna colour in princesses?”

Loki doesn’t answer.

“Because I think we both know who the real tool is.” Tony hooks his foot over the back of his leg, relaxes. “And that’s not meant as an insult- or, not only as an insult. They can’t get in without you.”

“I have no choice.” So very soft, Tony could have imagined it.

He wonders what he should do, what Natasha would need him to do. Shut up in case Loki might say more? Keep pushing in case he clams up?

Natasha should know better than to expect him to shut up. “Yeah, I’d say you do. Because here? No Chitauri. If you open the portal? Lots and lots of Chitauri. Which would you prefer?”

He turns, his eyes are burning with rage. “What would you know of it?!” He storms up and slams a hand to the Plexiglas. Ice explodes over the surface, cracking and crusting and painting pale ferns over it. Tony flinches. “You are *weak!*” Loki snarls. “You are *pathetic.* You have no idea what you face, you cannot even imagine the power I have seen! You will be *crushed,* annihilated! I will see you beaten down and bleeding until you *beg* me for release!”

Tony lets him rant. “You won’t.” He says when Loki pauses to catch his breath.

The ice is melting, letting in fractured images of Loki’s screwed up, spitting face. “What won’t I do, you mewing *infant?*”

“See us begging for death.” Tony shifts more comfortably against the railing. “Oh, we might beg,” he puts in before Loki can sneer at him, “But you won’t be there to see it, will you? Because they’re going to strap you to the first rocket they launch.”

Maybe it’s the ice, but he thinks Loki’s face has gone paler. “As though they rely on such worthless, mortal-“ his voice quavers, breaks.
“Or whatever it is.” Tony shrugs. “You’ll be the first one they take out.”

“You have no idea.” He repeats, almost under his breath. Then he looks up, his eyes are glazed under the ice. “But you will. I will show you. Just wait. They’ll show you what real power is. What your warm light for all mankind looks like.”

Suddenly, Natasha reappears. Tony jumps, and so does Loki. “Okay, how do you do that?”

“He’s talking about Pepper's tower.” Natasha doesn’t even look at Loki. “He said before, that’s the energy source he wants to use.” She grabs Tony’s arm, starts pulling him away.

Tony cranes his head back, “Seriously?” He shouts back at Loki. “Then yeah, you’re totally right to be scared, Pepper is going to make you wish you were never-“ the door slams closed and he gives up.

“That’s not what he’s scared of.” Natasha says evenly.

“Yeah, but he really should be. Have you ever seen Pepper angry- really angry? Because she’s really-“


Tony stops, or tries to. Natasha hauls him on. “Wow. You’ve really got it bad. I mean, I knew that, after the toilet debacle, but, I thought it was bad for me-“

“No.” This time she stops, pins him up against the wall so easily that it sends wild hot panic kicking into his stomach. “You had no idea. You had her and you decided your little adventures were more important.” She lets him go and Tony staggers, rubbing his throat. He coughs.

“Okay. You are a fucking mad stalker and I’m alerting tower security-“

“Do it. For Loki. I will be there if you need me.”

That’s a threat if nothing is. Tony pulls out his phone and dials. “Pepper?”

“Tony? This isn’t a good time-“

“You’ve got a mad god, an alien army and a psycho assassin with a crush heading to the tower. Please shut off the reactor and get yourself out yesterday?”

There’s a pause. “You involved the tower? I told you-“

“Yeah, I know, I know.” Tony leans against the wall, masses his throat. “To be fair, it’s really not my fault, I’ve been trying to talk the god out for it for the last hour.”

“Damn it.” She hisses. “I am literally about to send a tour group there, if the reactor isn’t on, what are they going to think-“

“Pep, please. Giant alien army.”

She pauses. “Really?”

“Really.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve exaggerated.”
“I really don’t think I am.”

“Right.” She takes a breath. “Please don’t destroy my tower.”

He’s about to ask who’s name is on the side of it, but doesn’t. He knows how far to push his luck.
“Just stay away, it could get nasty.”

“I’ll make sure it’s evacuated and I’ll shut the reactor down myself. Keep me updated through Jarvis.
Good luck.”

“You too.” He rings off, sighs. Oh well, back to the grind. He wonders how the others have been getting on.

He’s three paces from the laboratory door before it suddenly flies open and Banner and Rhodey burst out. Rhodey is in the suit and Banner is holding a pair of weird tongs and they’re carrying Loki’s spear thing like it’s about to explode.

“Um.” Tony flattens himself against the wall in case it is about to go off. “Not good?”

“This is bad news.” Steve appears behind them, carrying a massive and actually kinda familiar gun.

Tony stiffens. “That’s a Talon! How the fuck did they get hold a of a fucking Talon- and what did they do to it?” He grabs it off Steve. It’s definitely modelled on the Talon, but they’ve ripped out half the insides and shoved in a bunch of connections that make no sense. “What the hell?”

“Tesseract weapons.” Steve grits out. “Like Hydra.”

“Called it.” Tony groans. Thor’s behind him, carrying another case of the bastardised Talons. “What are you doing with them?”

“Going overboard.” Bruce calls back. “That sceptre was- well, it makes people want to fight.”

“Oh.” Tony looks at Bruce. “Oh. Okay. I think we’ve worked out another phase of Drunk LARP Kitty’s plan.”

Bruce’s back is taut. He doesn’t turn around, knuckles white against the tongs. Tony steps up and puts a hand on his shoulder. Bruce turns his head very slightly towards him, then relaxes a little.

“So I took an executive decision to throw the lot over the side.” Rhodey puts in. “We weren’t getting anything from it anyway.”

“No need, Natasha worked out where the cube is.” They all stop and stare. “He’s going to make himself Pepper’s number one enemy.”


“Natasha’s gone to tell them to adjust course.” They continue along the corridor to the hanger.

“Too slow.” Rhodey shakes his head. He looks at them and Tony knows he isn’t Rhodey now, he’s Colonel Rhodes, War Machine. “Tony, you carry Steve. I’ll take Banner. Thor- you can fly, right? We can make it much faster on our own.”

“I cannot leave Loki.” Thor looks back uncertainly.

Rhodey looks about to protest, but sighs and lets it go. Thor isn’t on their team, they can’t really
order him around. “Come on, let’s get rid of this garbage.”

Tony drops back into step beside Steve, they duck around the service corridors, away from any agents. “Tony?”

“Hmm? Yeah Cap?” Tony jerks out of a reverie.

“I-“ Steve looks away, looks down. “I’m glad you weren’t there. We were- there was shouting.”

“I bet,” Tony smiles. “I’ve got a mean mouth on me- and don’t make innuendos.”

“No.” Steve smiles back, but then it fades. “And that’s not what I meant- the spear, what we said- what I said. Tony, it was ugly.” He looks away, ashamed. “I’m so sorry, Colonel.”

“We all said stupid crap.” Rhodey says tightly. “I’ve heard worse, Steve, don’t worry.”

“I’m just glad-“ Steve turns back to Tony, ”I could have said some pretty horrible stuff to you.”

Tony is about to say he can take it, but- “Rule four?”

Steve nods tightly. “I wouldn’t have meant any of it, but-“

But Tony is very glad he didn’t have to hear it. He’s glad he didn’t have to look at Steve with those words ringing in his ears. It’s been hard enough getting used to having Steve around as it is, if he’d said half of the things Tony can imagine-

Their friendship isn’t quite there yet, but that would have definitely put it in the toilet.

“I’m sorry.” Steve says softly.

Tony shakes himself. This is stupid. “I’m not having you apologise for something you didn’t even say.” Tony says firmly. “Now let’s get these things over the side.”

The hangar is open, they walk out over to the edge. Steve and Tony look over the edge, it’s a long way down. “I think we’ve over a lake.” Steve reports.

“Good enough.” Bruce lets Rhodey take the sceptre.

“Proudly announcing the first and possibly only Avengers Olympics.” Tony leans on the railing, grins. “Going for gold is Rhodey with the javelin throw. One javelin, singular.”

Rhodey laughs. Bruce smiles, Thor just looks confused.

“But beginning with the pirated tech garbage discus.” Tony continues, grinning. “Cap? Wanna be up first?”

“This is a contest?” Thor frowns.

“Apparently.” Steve hefts the gun, takes a few practise swings.

“Excellent!” Thor beams. “I will defeat all in this mighty game.” He and Steve take a few steps back, flexing.

Tony tries not to giggle. Bruce shakes his head, “Alphas.” Tony looks at Rhodey to see how he takes that.
Rhodey isn’t paying attention. He’s staring away, towards the horizon. Tony follows his gaze.

“Um- is this good?” Tony points. “That doesn’t look good.”

They look. Steve and Thor lower the guns. “They could be from the Helicarrier.” Rhodey says uncertainly.

“One way to find out.” Tony picks up his phone. “Jarvis? What are they saying?”

“Is Jarvis part of the Helicarrier?” Steve looks at him.

“He is now.”

“SHIELD is warning that these are incoming enemies.” Jarvis answers. “Mind controlled by Loki.”

They look at the massive fleet.

“Tony, get the armor.” Rhodey says softly.

“On it.”

Rhodey looks at the fleet. It’s seriously bad news. They’ll easily take down the carrier- and fighting them is a delay they really don’t need. He looks down at the sceptre in his hands, then at the gun in Steve’s. “Steve, you said that thing is powered by the Tesseract?”

Steve looks down at the gun. “I think so- it looks like the Red Skull’s weapons did.”

“Okay.” Rhodey lifts the sceptre. “You aim.”

He isn’t sure how it works, but then SHIELD didn’t know how to use the Tesseract either so it can’t be that complicated. He touches the blue light to the gun, and it whirs and trembles in Steve’s hands.

“Should we do this?” Steve looks at him.

“We need a battery.” Rhodey says with a sigh. “It can go over the edge when we’re finished.”

He touches Thor’s gun, it growls and powers up. “This is a puny weapon.” Thor frowns. “Allow me to show you the might of Mjolnir.”

“Just one shot and you can smack them with your hammer.” Tony comes back armored. Good.

Thor shrugs, and- before Rhodey can say anything else- he fires.

The shot arches out blue and blinding, so hot Rhodey can feel it through the armor. It hits a plane, blows off the wing and keeps going, crushing through three more before arching off into empty air.

There’s a moment’s heart-stopping silence. “Well shit.” Tony speaks for all of them. Steve hurls his gun over the edge in disgust. It spins off into the void, flashing briefly silver in the sunlight. Tony follows it up with the rest of the crate.

“Thor, hang onto yours.” Rhodey says steadily. “We can get another shot off before they’re on us.”
Steve looks at him. “These things—”

“Every plane we take down is a plane that isn’t attacking us.” Rhodey doesn’t take his eyes off the planes, they’re a strange make- they look a bit like those Canadian jet fighters America paid them to not make for fear it’d make the US look bad. He touches the sceptre a little regretfully to Thor’s gun. “Fire at the front runner, see how many you can take out.”

“Stop!” Rhodey jerks, turns. Coulson rushes at Thor and grabs the gun, trying to tear it out of his hands. Thor, taken by surprise, just tightens his grip.

They don’t have time for SHIELD’s unhealthy love for their tech. “Take the shot!” Rhodey snaps.

Thor tries to push him off, but Coulson’s fucking determined. Rhodey’s never seen anyone try and tackle someone the size of Thor, but Coulson’s making a spirited attempt. He reeks of hot desperation that borders, sharp, on madness. Steve steps over and tries to gently pull him away. “Phil—”

“That’s Clint!” He roars at Steve, so furiously Steve actually takes a step back. “He’s leading them! Don’t shoot-“ He grapples Thor again, who has apparently had entirely enough of this and throws the gun over the side to join the rest of Phase Two.

“Your Shield-brother is in the first of these machines?” Thor booms. “Fear not, I will retrieve him.” He throws his hammer up in a shattering of thunder and soars off.

Rhodey looks down at the sceptre, then throws it overboard as well. No point hanging on to it. “Can you hold them off?” He turns to Coulson.

Coulson is staring over the side where the sceptre and most of Phase Two has now vanished. “I—what?”

“Loki has sent the Tesseract to Stark’s tower.” Steve says quickly. “We need to get there before he can power it. Can you hold them off?”

Coulson stares out to where one of the planes is brought down in bolt of lightning. “Apparently.” Rhodey feels sorry for him. He looks completely beaten. Losing Captain America and his Omega in the same month has hit him hard.

“Banner,” Rhodey turns to the doctor. “We’ll need you to help with the Tesseract, if you can, and if you can’t- well, we’ll have a lot of enemies to smash.”

Banner looks at him, takes a deep breath. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“None of this is a good idea.” Tony cheerfully snaps up the faceplate. “You’re a pretty good one right now.”

Banner looks at him, then nods. Out on the planes, Thor has landed on Clint’s plane and has smashed the windshield somehow. He’s holding a limp human figure up triumphantly. Coulson closes his eyes, slumps back against the wall, and takes deep, calming breaths. Steve pats him on the back sympathetically.

“Banner, on me.” Rhodey pulls a parachute harness out of its locker and strips off everything but the harness. He doesn’t have Tony’s handholds, but they can rig something up. “Steve, ready? It’s a long flight to—“

An alarm screams out in the Helicarrier.
“Shit.” Rhodey looks out- most of the planes are still a click or so out, trying to deal with Thor. What could-

Oh no.

“Loki.” Coulson goes pale. Paler. “He’s got out.”

“Knew that guy wanted to be here.” Tony growls as Steve hovers uncertainly, half on his back. “Guess he decided it was time to go.”

“Phil.” Steve looks at him, “If you need us-“

Rhodey looks at him, “I can stay.” He says finally. “If Tony can carry you both-“

“No.” Coulson says at last. His hands are trembling. “You need to stop the Tesseract. We can handle Loki. If we can’t-“ he gives Steve a thin, brittle smile, like winter sunlight, “Avenge us?”

Steve steps down from Tony, over to Phil, and lays a hand on his shoulder. “You are too good a man to be caught up in this.”

And just—the way he says it is like something from the old newsreels, all solid American patriotism and unshakable confidence that makes Rhodey want to laugh and salute the flag at the same time.

It works with Phil. He straightens, his eyes shine. “Thank you.” He breathes. Swallows. “If- when you come back. I have a- um, collection. Cards. Of you. If you could sign them-“

Steve smiles. “I’d love to.”

“And-“ he looks at the rampaging chaos of the planes- none of them were made to withstand close proximity to an electrical storm and a Norse god. “Take Clint.”

Rhodey blinks, “Is that a good idea?”

Coulson closes his eyes. “I have no idea.” He opens them, pleading. “Look after him.”

They can drop him off on a rooftop somewhere. Safer than out here. “On it.” Rhodey flips the faceplate down. “Ready Doctor Banner?”

Bruce has knotted the harness into something functional. Rhodey lets him slide it over the armor and buckle himself in. “Ready.”

“Steve, Tony; you flyby Thor and get this Clint guy, copy?”

“Got it.” Steve’s voice comes clear through the headpiece. He’s on Tony’s back, ready to go. “Good luck Phil.”

Phil nods, then takes a breath and runs back inside the Helicarrier, towards the alarms. And Loki.

“Shit.” Rhodey grits out, and fires the jets.

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Tony swoops into the fray at insane speed, and no wonder. There’s so much charge in the air that
static electricity starts coursing over the armor’s joints and pooling at the extremities like St Elmo’s fire. Steve grits his teeth as his hair struggles to stand on end under his helmet.

“There-“ Steve taps Tony’s shoulder, “On your four.”

“Got it.” Tony scythes closer, Thor is in the air again, holding the fallen man in one hand and bringing down sheets of lightning on the planes with the other- the air so full of it that bolts are jumping of their own accord from plane to plane.

Steve shudders as one plane crumples and falls, only breathing again when he sees parachutes bloom out far below. It’s a fight to wrest one hand from the armor and reach out.

Thor sees them, holds up the man. Tony swoops down and they make the pass, the Omega heavy and limp in Steve’s grasp. He’s wearing some kind of harness though, and it makes him easier to haul up.

“Loki’s loose!” Tony shouts. “Get back to the Helicarrier when you’re done.”

“My brother shall not escape!” He nods, and brings his hammer down on the plane. It explodes.

“Got the guy?” Tony steadies them so Steve can get Clint as wedged as he can. It’s more than a little... awkward. They guy’s suit is pretty much skin tight and although he smells pretty solidly bonded, being so close to an Omega is pretty embarrassing.

“Nng.” He groans.

“Sorry.” Steve has no idea what he’s even apologised for.

“Hanging in there? We’re about to go fast.”

Steve tightens his grip, checks the guy’s braced. “I’m good.”

Tony nods, flattens out until they’re horizontal, and-

Well. Steve is very glad he’s as strong as he is.

The slipstream is so intense he flattens himself on the guy and Tony and it’s not longer uncomfortable, it’s completely practical. He squints streaming eyes through the blinding wind, the world blurring by so fast he can barely register it. Somehow, in between the flashes of sunlight and cloud and the wind- Steve is suddenly aware he’s smiling. It feels good. It feels amazing.

“What the hell?” The guy blinks, tries to look at Steve and cries out in the hurricane wind.

“Don’t move.” Steve warns. He looks at the guy, wonders if he’s still brainwashed. “Can you go lower, Tony? If he’s still on Loki’s side, we’ll need to drop him off.”

“Drop-“ The guy turns his head, his eyes go wide.

“You’re on Iron Man’s back somewhere above Massachusetts,” Steve continues.

“Who-“ His eyes focus on Steve. “Where’s Phil?” His voice sharpens, brittle.

Steve hesitates, on a besieged Helicarrier with a mad god seemed a bad thing to say. “In trouble.” He says instead. “He asked us to take you away.”

His lip twists, “That- sounds like him.” He looks over Tony’s shoulder. “Where are we going?”
“To fight an alien army in New York.” It doesn’t feel real. Not much about this century does, even
now, so he’s getting used to it.

The guy half sits up, Steve quickly pins him before he can slide off. “Have- has Loki-“

“Not yet.” Steve glances over to Rhodey and Bruce, flying parallel a few hundred meters away.
“We’re inbound to stop it.”

“Got it.” He closes his eyes. “Captain America?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Clint Barton.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Judging by the one-sided conversation,” Tony puts in, “He’s on our side?”

“Yes.”

“Ask if he wants to join in.” Rhodey comes through. “We could do with all hands, here.”

Clint appears to be more than willing, and since, as they approach New York, Steve can already see
a worrying blue glow around Stark Tower, he’s rather grateful for it.

“Get me down a rooftop,” Clint puts, “I can do the rest.”

Steve relays it to Tony. He nods, and peels off to circle Stark Tower. “Shit.” It’s a whisper, but Steve
gets it clear. “I hope Pepper’s clear.”

“She trained with Black Widow.” Rhodey comes in, “Loki wants her tower, he’s gonna have to fight
for it.”

There are four of them. Three are behind her, but Pepper is deeply, fiercely glad for Natasha’s
observation tips. She can count the number of them breathing as they march her up the tower, catch
sight of stragglers behind as they round landings. Breathe in the mixed scents of strangely calm
Alphas. She catches a brief glimpse of them in the glass of the door as she is pushed out of the fire
escape.

She doesn’t get to see whoever they’re taking her to, she’s shoved to the floor straight away.

Bad move, she isn’t even tied up.

“She is the one who shut off the reactor.” Her captor says flatly.

“And she can switch it on again.” The voice is smooth, but there’s something taut in it. Pepper looks
up through strands of her own hair at the speaker. Omega. Tall, thin, jumpy as Tony after ten cups of
coffee. “Your friends might have taken my sceptre, but there are- other ways of persuading your
kind.” His eyes are like chips of ice, the ground around him shimmers with frost. Pepper marks it all
carefully.
Learn everything about your surroundings. Natasha’s voice comes in her mind. Use them.

She waits, tensed for the right moment. The man steps over, and grasps her by the chin, hauling her up.

He smells of sweat, and fear. there's Omega there but it's mixed in with the smell of ice and winters and a thousand others pepper can't even try and place. He’s- not human. There’s no other possibility. Pepper fights down the itch behind her teeth, forces her eyes on his face, not his throat. Not yet. Not yet.

“You will get the reactor working again.” He hisses, “Or your beloved Avengers will come back to find you in pieces. Do you want to find out how many limbs you can lose and still live?”

He isn’t in the least bit frightening. Not because he doesn’t mean it- right now, Pepper rather thinks he’d tear his own legs off if it’s get the reactor working- but because he’s trembling, face shining with sweat, eyes wide and rolling, the fear pours off him in waves.

“I cr-r-r-” Pepper tries to speak through his grip of her jaw. He relaxes it a bit. “I dismantled it with a wrench.” She spits. “It'll take weeks for a new one to come from Malibu.”

Tony owes her about a million dollars worth of damn nice shoes for this. It was like clubbing her own baby to death.

The guy stares at her for a moment, then screams. He tears his hair and stamps the floor like a three year old. Ice bursts out in jagged shards where his foot hit the floor. His skin ripples blue for a moment. The room smells of old cold, the scent of glaciers and the arctic.

Pepper looks briefly out of the massive windows. Tony, where are you? She can’t even call him because Jarvis lost connection to the tower when she smashed the reactor.

“What should we do?” Her captors shift uncomfortably.

The man turns, his eyes are gleaming scarlet. “Fire it!” He shrieks. “Use what it has and fire it!”

Pepper tenses as one of them come up behind her. “She we take her?”

“Leave her here!” The man snarls. “I want her to see it! It was useless!” He roars at her. “Your little sabotage only slowed them down! They’ll come through, then they’ll open it properly and then- and then-“ he trails off, seems to be staring into a space only he can see.

It’s her chance. Pepper lifts her foot and- praying this guy is human enough for it to count- kicks hard.

The gamble pays off, his eyes go wide, water. Pepper brings her head down a heartbeat later and feels the satisfying smash of nose on her forehead. He reels and she lunges at him, hands out to grapple-

He vanishes under her hands.

Pepper hits the bare ground hard, coughing and struggling to turn it into a roll. She staggers to her feet- and he’s behind her. She just has time to get her arms up to break the hold- it works, she’s stronger than he expected- then steps back hard and brings the spiked heel of her- far too nice- shoe into his foot.

A snarl of pain, she turns and- he’s gone again- now halfway across the room. She kicks off her
shoes, ready to charge- and he blasts her.

He isn’t holding anything, but golden light flares out and throws her three feet back. She crashes to
the ground again, the wind knocked out of her.

“Pathetic- mortal- ow.” He hisses, hobbling around Tony’s ruined drinks island. “You’re too late. It’s
ready.” He smiles- or tries to, it fractures like the melting ice around them. “You’ll see.” He breathes.
“You’ll all see. You’re too late.”

Pepper spots a bright spot of red, gleaming as it round a building, and smiles. “Maybe.” She gets up
on her elbows, “But I think the cavalry’s just arrived.”

Tony hits the plate glass without checking his speed. He tears across the room and hits the far wall.
The panel drops open and bits of the prototype Mark VII scatter across the floor.


“You’re too late.” Loki snarls. He looks a bit the worst for the wear, he’s limping quite badly. “They
will be starting the reactor any minute.”

“Well, they’re having to deal with Bruce Banner and Rhodey at the moment.” Tony shrugs, “Not to
mention Captain America.”

“You brought the Hulk to the tower?” Pepper hisses.

“Alien invasion.” Tony reminds her.

“You will fail.” Loki is shivering. He looks awful. “They are coming. There is nothing you can do-“

“Nothing you can do either?”

Loki doesn’t answer, he looks up at the sky, ash pale. He shudders. “My sceptre.” He looks at Tony,
his eyes are wide, Tony can see the whites all around. “What have you done with it?”

“Didn’t Agent tell you? It went overboard with the rest of phase two.” Tony shrugs. “You’re gonna
be dredging a pretty damn big lake.”

“No!” It’s a scream, Loki’s fingers are hooked into claws, the air fractures as every drop of moisture
in it freezes. “Do you know what you have done!”

“I’m guessing your little friends aren’t going to be too happy.”

Loki doesn’t answer, his sides heave. Pepper is on her feet now, backing up beside Tony, he crooks
a finger to motion her back. He wants to see what Loki does.

He’s shaking now, eyes darting around at them, at the workshop- fucking hell Tony’s glad the bots
are back in Malibu- and finally out of the window at the city.

“You want to see the day out?” Tony says softly, “You better get up there and shut that thing off.”

“You don’t understand.” He’s smiling, rictus and wild and so terrified Tony feels his hair stand up in
sympathy. “It’s too late. You will fall. Your world will fall.”

“Then we’ll go down fighting.” Tony shrugs. He walks over to a piece of the Mark VII, and pulls off the gauntlet. He tosses it to Pepper. She looks at it distastefully but puts it on.

There’s something that takes his breath away about the way the armor moulds itself to Pepper’s wrist and hand. Like it had finally fulfilled its purpose and become part of something bigger that Tony could give it.

The tower shudders. Tony skids but manages to keep his feet. Pepper stumbles and grabs hold of a pillar to stay up, Loki is thrown to his knees. “You will die.” He breathes. “You will fail.”

“Not for lack of trying.” Tony doesn’t really feel the bravado. The blue light above them shoots up and pools high in the sky. There’s a hole, a black hole in the sky.

Beyond it, something moves.

A lot of somethings.

Loki’s hands clench into fists. His mouth moves, shaping useless words. Tony stands beside him, looking up at the growing hoard descending.

“You.” It’s a struggle to keep his voice steady. “Are fucked.”

Loki doesn’t argue.

“You stay here until they come in and kill you, or you can go down fighting with the rest of us.” Tony pats him on the shoulder. “Thor told me something of you people- you’re not ones to die in holes. Up to you, Drunk Kitty.”

“Get me to the roof.” Pepper comes up behind him. “I know this place backwards, it’s there’s anything we can do-“

Tony wants to say no. Wants to grab Pepper and fly her to safety to- to where exactly? The whole of New York is a warzone and if they don’t hold it- what then?

They need him. He can’t afford to leave the fight. He looks at Pepper. He can’t. He can’t he can’t it’s Pepper.

Pepper looks at him steadily. She knows. This is exactly what it was like for her, every time he went out.

Tony closes his eyes, trusts that Pepper is better at making these calls than he is. Picks her up and flies her to the roof.

Rhodey swings to the opposite side of the tower and sends a shoulder rocket spinning into a knot of the weird flying bike things. He has no idea what they are, but the rocket does its job damn well.

“Tony!” More of the things are coming down. Rhodey hopes like hell they’re going to run out of warm bodies eventually, but at least the portal is small enough that they’re dealing with a pretty serious bottleneck. “Need you up here.”
“Coming.” Tony bobs up beside him. Below them, Pepper and Clint are holding out on the roof, struggling to break into the forcefield around the Tesseract. Bruce has already Hulked out and is bouncing from bike to bike, sending bits of aliens and machinery raining down to street level.

Which reminds him. “Steve, we need you on the street. Deal with any who get down that far, and keep the civilians away. I’m not letting this get worse than it has to.”

“Copy that.” The thirty first floor window smashes and Steve dives out, he lands on a bike, clubs the driver and jumps the last sixteen floors to bounce shield first off one of the flagpoles hanging over the tower entrance. Rhodey watches him run down towards the milling crowds just long enough to check he’s okay, then turns back to Tony.

“What about Loki?”

Tony shrugs. “Left him in the tower. Kinda got bigger things right now.”

He’s not wrong. “We need to keep these guys contained. You’re faster, corral them and bring them towards me. I can take them out and we don’t want these guys going beyond the block.”

Tony hovers for a moment as if he’d like to argue, but maybe he can’t think of anything to say, or maybe he’s finally realised there are bigger things than even his ego, because he nods, and jets away to cut off a pair of bikes.

Rhodey takes a breath, lets it out. Okay. They’ve got a plan. They can hold out for now. There’s a crackle in his headset, “Rhodey?”

“Pepper?” Rhodey brings his hand up and blows the bike Tony’s sent his way out of the air, another swoops in behind and he has to loop to escape the blue shot from them. Tony’s on it the next moment and it spirals down to smash on the tarmac.

“I really hope Tony was winding Loki up about that sceptre.” Pepper gasps.

Rhodey goes cold inside the armor. “Did he tell him we threw it overboard?”

“Yes.”

“Then he wasn’t.”

Pepper unleashes a torrent of swearing that makes Rhodey blink. “Ten years in the army and never heard half of those.”

“Oh shut up. I deal with Alphas on a daily basis.” Pepper catches her breath. “This Selvig says the sceptre is the only of closing the portal.”

Oh fuck. Rhodey fights the urge to slam his face into the side of the nearest building. “That’s not an option.”

“I got that much.” Pepper sighs. “We’re going to do what we can, maybe we can find some way of-“ she breaks off. Rhodey turns.

“Shit.” He can hear the faint, familiar roar of the jets, the V formation closing. “Jarvis, can you patch me into their comms?”

“Consider it done.” Jarvis’ voice is followed by the familiar crackle of comms. It’s a sudden, strange swell of nostalgia, he misses flying jets. He misses missions that aren’t entirely fucking insane.
“Stand down! This Is Colonel James Rhodes, codename War Machine. Get those jets around and stand down! This is an unstable-“

That’s as far as he gets before one of the bikes banks around Tony and gets a clear line to the jets. It fires.

The plane isn’t nearly as manoeuvrable as they are, they are trained on avoiding missiles and bombs, not lasers-

The plane blows a wing, tips and spirals down in freefall. Rhodey has a heartbeat of agonised uncertainty before Tony smashes the bike and resolves it for him. He dives after the plane.

The pilot is too low to bail, is scrabbling with his chute straps when Rhodey catches the plane in midair and drags it down to a crunching landing at street level. He hauls off the cockpit and pulls up his faceplate. “Leave the plane and get the civilians out of there! We can’t lose anyone else. Copy?”

The man stares, wide-eyed above his airmask. He nods.

“Good man.” Rhodey slams his faceplate down and takes off again. “Steve, sitrep.”

“I’ve liasoned with the police, they’re establishing a cordon and getting the people into the subway.” There’s a grunt and a smash. “There aren’t many hostiles this far down.”

“Get what you can, Tony, what’s it looking like up there?”

“Not bad.” He sees Tony in a flash of scarlet between the buildings, “There aren’t too many coming through, the portal’s pretty much- oh fuck.”

Rhodey looks up, then sees it. A shadow on that far side, blocking out the stars.

The next moment, an enormous head jerks through the portal, mouth opening to show an endless array of teeth.

“Gotta keep it from coming through-“

Tony rockets up and Rhodey doesn’t try and stop him- it’s worth a try. But more and more of the bikes are clustering around the portal, guarding it. Tony is weaving through a hail of fire.

Rhodey swears and fires the repulsors, following Tony. This is not good, if that thing gets through-

But it seems to be having trouble. It roars, a tearing sound like desperate thunder, and tries to heave itself through.

“The portal’s too small-“ Tony grunts as a bolt hits him. Rhodey tenses, but it’s only glancing, he spins around and rights himself. “Pepper cut it off in time-“

The thing roars again, tries to pull back- but something seems to pushing it from that far side. It screams now, and even inside the suit Rhodey has to struggle not to cover his ears. It bulges through the portal, mouth open, miles of grey armoured flesh welling through the rift in the sky-

It tears free with a hideous, mangled scream and ripping and black blood floods down like torrential rain. Chunks of flesh and armor pieces hail down on New York. “Steve! Incoming!” Rhodey has time to shout before the screaming, dying beast falls. Its sides are torn open, white bones stark to the air. It gives one final, broken moan and hits Central Park with a crash that shakes every skyscraper in the city.
“Jesus.” Rhodey breathes. “Steve-“

“Copy.” Steve is breathless. “The area’s clear. Just property damage.”

Thank fuck for that. “Pepper, any leads?”

“Can you see the Hulk?” Rhodey glances around. There’s a mad scrap on the top of the Empire State Building.

“He’s playing at King Kong, want me to try and get him to you?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this- but yes. If we can’t get to the Tesseract, we can destroy the building around it.” Pepper sounds sick, Rhodey doesn’t blame her. She worked so hard on the tower.

“We’ll rebuild it.” Tony puts in.

Rhodey nods, “I’ll handle this lot. Tony, can you get the Hulk?”

“Why me?” It’s a halfhearted whine, Tony’s already going.

“You’re more eyecatching.”

“Damn right.”

With the failure of their creature, more bikes are pouring through the rift in the sky. Rhodey fires off an decent air to air missile shot before they hit him- and that sends a good three of them down- but then the rest are one him and it’s hard to focus on anything but the blur of fists and blue shots and the alien machinery clawing its way through into their world.

“Rhodey!” Tony’s voice cuts in, sharp and frantic.

Rhodey blinks, lets go of the bike he was pounding. It falls lifeless. “Tony?”

“Get the hell out of there!”

Rhodey looks up and- fuck, not another one.

This one is smaller, leaner, its jaws long and alligator like. Rhodey fires away and almost at once realises he’s been hit. He’s getting sluggish reactions from his boots and his left arm is a wrench to move, the repulsors firing just a second too late to be comfortable.

“Allow me sir.” Jarvis comes through his headset. He and Rhodey don’t often talk- he’s Tony’s AI, not his, but he manages to fix something and his boots and shoulder ease up a bit.

It’s still not quite right though, and Rhodey looks up at the thing fighting its way through the portal. He hopes it’ll be enough.

“Incoming!” A new voice. It takes him a moment to place it.

“Romanov?”

“This is our frequency.”

“Shut up Tony.”

“Thank you.” He can see her now, cresting over Manhattan. She’s in the SHIELD gunship they’d
been riding to intercept Loki, and riding on top of it-

Well hey, they’d been hoping for the cavalry. Thor gives a roar Rhodey hears even from here and
hurls himself at the flying monster.

“Before you get too happy,” Steve comes in, “I’ve got a visual on Loki.”

Crap, that’s all they need. “What’s he doing?”

“See for yourself. On your six.”

Rhodey drags his eyes from the monster- it’s coming through, its sides are cauterised with laser blasts
and he wonders if the aliens had deliberately cut it down to fit through- but then he sees Loki, at the
shattered window of the tower.

He’s looking at them. Even so far away, Rhodey can see he’s shaking. He raises a trembling hand-
Rhodey looks back, repulsors ready.

His eyes meet Loki’s. Loki looks at him, at the fallen monster across Central Park, the new horror
coming through, Thor with his hammer cracking and throwing lighting. His eyes rest, finally, on
Tony.

“Come on.” Tony flips up his facemask. “Loki.”

Loki’s mouth twists in what might be a smile and what might be a scream, then turns. The silver blast
from his hand takes out two unsuspecting bikes.

“Thank fuck for that.” Rhodey squares himself and turns back to their more immediate problem. “All
of you steer clear of the Tower. Loki’s not on our side but he sure as fuck ain’t on theirs. Copy?”

“And our options?” He catches sight of Pepper as he jets up to join Thor. The Hulk is with her,
massive fists crashing down on the concrete. They’re breaking off the entire side of the tower the
Tesseract is on.

“Stay where you are.”

And- oh god the thing is through. It’s bleeding and howling, the metal plates on its back wrenched
off and showing grey proud flesh underneath, but it’s alive, and so maddened with pain it charges at
Thor blindly, apparently not even feeling the lightning.

Thor banks, swings his hammer. It sinks into the bloody mess of the back of the creature’s neck and
it doesn’t even appear to feel it. A thrash of the huge flipper- the ends blackened and smoking- sends
Thor crashing into the few unbroken windows of the Empire State.

“Fuck,” Rhodey gets some altitude. He wonders if the fallen jet might still have some missiles-

“Some distance,” Romanov comes in sharp through the headset. A rocket flies past him, missing by
inches, and smashes into the inside of the thing’s mouth. It’s followed by fire and smoke and
fragments of smell and a stench so foul the suit seals itself off automatically.

“Thor! Stark! Keep it angry, get it to open its mouth!”

“Copy that.” Rhodey answers.

There’s a crackle in his headset. The military frequency. “Situation under control. Keep everyone
away and bring in ground troops to secure-“

“I’m not interested in your platitudes, Rhodes.”

The voice makes him freeze. Ross. Shit. He looks over to the top of Stark Tower. The Hulk is through three floors and the roof is starting to lean alarmingly.

“Steve, make sure the block around the Tower is clear and get out yourself.”

“Copy.”

“This is your warning to clear the area right now.” Ross snaps.

Rhodey takes a breath. God, he hates the man. The sort of smug asshole who goes on about the ‘chair force’ and makes more messes than they resolve. “With all due respect sir, we are maintaining a cordon and containing the threat-“

“I don’t care what you think you’re doing.” There’s a word at the end that isn’t said. Rhodey’s back prickles because it doesn’t need to be. Boy. “You will clear the area this instant. The military is handling it from now on.”

Rhodey glances around, there’s no sign of any tanks. Romanov has shot a second missile down the creature’s throat and it’s thrashing in agony above New York. Thor and Tony are trying to keep it within the police cordon. “These creatures have come prepared for our conventional weapons-” He starts.

“We have a nuclear missile inbound to your location.” Ross continues, as if he hadn’t heard Rhodey.

Rhodey goes cold. “Sir.” His lips are numb. “You cannot be suggesting-“

“They have fired. The air force doesn’t want their best pilot turning into a nuclear shadow, or we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Out.”

The headset goes dead. Rhodey stares for a moment at the fight around the beast. It’s got Thor pinned, snapping at him with enormous jaws. Romanov is trying to distract it. “We need backup!” She shouts, seeing him looking.

“We’ve got bigger problems.” He says hoarsely.

Tony can see the missile now, blazing in the sky above New York. They’re aiming at the Tower and oh fuck oh God Pepper is on the Tower.

Not that it would make a difference. He knows the payload. Everything within a mile will be obliterated.

Jarvis. Jarvis and Dummy and You and Butterfingers and oh god they’re in Miami. Thank god thank god thank god-

“Steve, get as many as you can into the subway- then get in yourself!” Rhodey shouts. He’s keeping up with Tony as they blast towards the missile. “Everyone- get as far down and as far in as you can in case this doesn’t work.”
One look at Rhodey, and Tony knows they’ve had the same idea. Tony puts on an extra burst of speed to beat him to it. His gauntlets slam on each side of the steel tube. It’s the first time he’s been this close to a missile for years. It’s unpleasant, stomach churning deja-vu.

At least this one just has *Lockheed Martin* emblazoned on it, instead of his own name.

Tony swings his body around it, throws his repulsors behind and forces the nose up. It slowly drags out of its original shallow dive, rising slowly- too slowly. The buildings are rearing around them, the portal too high-

Rhodey’s hands clamp around the base of the missile, his added thrust pushes the missile just that bit further, that bit higher. They clear the block, are on course to pass over the Tower and into the portal.

“With all due respect-“ Rhodey spits out, a one-sided conversation with- probably whoever the *fuck* decided this level of collateral damage was okay. “No. No you can’t. I won’t allow it.”

Tony grits his teeth. The Chitauri can see what they’re doing, are flocking around the defend the portal. “We need the skies clear.”

“On it.” Natasha barrels into the throng, scattering bikes, guns blazing. Thor’s hammer flashes, catching the light and blazing with lightning.


“Hell no.” Rhodey snaps. “It’s my call. You get out there and keep them off.”

Tony looks at him. Looks down at the tower. Loki is on the rooftop. He’s alternating between blasting the Chitauri and icing the tower to make it easier for the Hulk to smash. Clint is shooting down bikes. Pepper-

Pepper’s looking up at them, red hair half blinding her. The repulsor in her hand glows blue.

“That’s an order, Tony.” Rhodey says.

He can see the streets below. It’s so far down but he can see Steve, a heartbeat’s pause to look up as he hands a child to the police. His eyes are fixed on the two of them.

Tony looks at Rhodey. Those blue slits of light in the impassive steel. He wishes he could see his face, behind that of War Machine. He’d have liked to see his face. One last time.

Tony closes his eyes. “War Machine override 001, three seconds.”

Jarvis wouldn’t have done it, if Tony had let him, but the overrides are automatic. War Machine’s eyes go dark, his repulsors cut out as the entire suit goes dead. Rhodesy scrabbles at the missile, struggling to hold his grip. He slides off the back of it, his weight tipping it higher, ever higher.

Then he’s gone. There’s only a moment before Tony sees the repulsors roar and he kicks himself up again, racing back up, trying to catch them.


“*Fuck you!”* Rhodey screams. “I’m the leader! It’s my call- *let go-*“

There’s an Alpha roar in there, even through the headset. Maybe once it would have made Tony let go, drop the missile and let it go away into the air. Now, it only locks Tony’s hands tighter around the missile, his blood hot and pounding, his hackles up.
“I don’t work like that, Rhodey.” Tony bares his teeth inside his helmet. The portal is gaping above him. There are stars beyond, bright and cold as worlds of ice. Distant, hostile, cruel.

*One for Rhodey to hitch a ride on*

“Sorry.” He breathes.

*One for Pepper to wear around her neck*

“Tony-“ she comes in, high, desperate. Choking. She’s crying.

*One for the bots.*

“I’m sorry.” He breathes again, too softly for the headset to pick up.

“Sir-“ Jarvis’ voice is weak and crackling, the portal reaches down to swallow him. “Tony-“

Then he’s through, and the connection is gone. He’s utterly alone. The emptiness of space explodes around him. Space impossible, unending. The stars a million malevolent eyes staring at him. This tiny, meaningless thing. This intruder.

He has to let go. The missile is pointed straight at the monstrous ship above him. He needs to let go. Even without Jarvis, he can see the readings are bad. This suit wasn’t made for this, it’s leaking air and the endless, hideous cold of absolute zero is creeping into the joins.

But his hands are locked. He can’t move them. A panicked, desperate, wild instinct gripping to it like a lifeline. He looks up at ship, helplessly. The huge, hideous ship. An army. A colony. An entire race of aliens, hungry for his planet.

And beyond it- Tony can’t see. But it’s there. Something huge. Huge and foul and hungry looking back at him.

Tony closes his eyes. but he can still feel the thing, it’s eyes boring through the suit and into him as though he was wearing paper. Terror freezes him, he can’t move. His hands are numb, he can barely feel them, little knots of cold and pain.

“Allow me, sir. “

Tony opens his eyes. “Jarvis-“

“Yes.” It’s grim, quietly furious. “We will not let you face this alone. Not again. Mark VI override 001.”

There a shudder in the suit as Jarvis takes control, the gauntlets springing open, forcing Tony’s hands off the missile. He kicks Tony off and fires the jets, sending them plummeting back into the portal.

The headset goes dark. “Jarvis-“

“I am rerouting all remaining power into sealing the suit.” Jarvis says grimly. “And you do not need to see this.”

This. An entire ship-world being blown to pieces. Tony wants to reach up and claw at his helmet- he needs to see- someone should bear witness- but the suit is dead around him.

“You don’t.” Jarvis says softly. “Spare yourself this, Tony.”
Limp inside the suit, the cold is growing more and more intolerable. The suit is nearly dead, power failing. Tony cannot even shiver. “I thought the connection to your servers cut out.”

“Yes.” Jarvis says flatly.

Tony stares into the dead darkness of the headset. “Jarvis- you- backups-“

“You have none. You went anyway.”

Tony actually wonders if he might be sick, but at that moment, there’s a hideous, universe shaking tremor, as if every lonely atom had shuddered at the same time, and a kick of concussive force that punches him the last few inches into unconsciousness.

The enormous monster is coming towards them. Pepper steps back, Clint a step behind. Selvig has already risked the stairs. “Go!” She shoves Clint. He looks back a moment, then nods, jumping down into the hole the Hulk has bored out.

The Hulk looks up, sees the monster above them and roars, bounding out with one jump, climbing up the creature’s side to pummel it with both fists.

Loki looks at them with wild, almost unseeing eyes. There are half a dozen Chitauri frozen to the wall. Pepper doesn’t want to know. “We’re getting really big company!” She shouts. “Clear out now!”

“What about you?” Clint shouts. He’s markedly ignoring Loki, which is probably for the best.

_The captain goes down with the ship._ She wants to say, but doesn’t. “Tony’s left me a few tricks,” She waves the repulsor, “And someone has to stay to make sure this portal gets closed. Go on, I’ll be right behind you.”

Looking up though- her heart locks somewhere behind her teeth and for a moment she’s two years back, staring at Stane’s monstrous armor again.

This is a thousand times the size, maddened and agonised and blind. It clears the tower so narrowly Pepper ducks and is splattered with hot grey blood. It stinks like antifreeze.

A rocket goes off blasting through the orbit of one eye. The creature screams again, but otherwise doesn’t seem to notice. The Hulk is punching and trying to tear bits of its back away, but doesn’t seem to be doing much damage. It’s rising again, sluggishly, but _rising_. Pepper looks up and sees Natasha, the gunship swinging down to hammer futilely at its belly. She’s not making a dent, but she’s keeping its attention on her.

“Visual on Tony!” Steve’s voice barks in her headpiece. Pepper looks up, and Tony is falling, dropping dead out of the sky.

“Someone catch him!” She shouts and- as if that was the cue, the huge creature above the tower suddenly stiffens, gives a final shattering shriek- and falls.

Pepper freezes, for a moment unable to do anything but stare as the wall of flesh and bone and armor falling towards her.
“Pepper!” Natasha’s voice shocks her back to life. She looks down at the repulsor, hopes to god it has enough charge, and fires.

The force of it knocks her clean off the tower, she juggles helplessly with the terrific downward jet until she balances on it, hovering in mid air hundreds of feet above New York.

Somewhere under the horrors and heartwrenching fear, the exhilaration rises cool and shivering. The hair on her arms and neck stands up and oh- oh god she’s flying-

There’s a crash. Pepper looks up just in time to see the beast’s massive head clip Natasha’s gunship. It’s just a glancing blow, but it knocks out an engine and suddenly the plane is spinning helplessly in mid-air, careening down to street level.

“Steve!” She shouts- but it’s useless. He can’t fly, and Rhodey’s too busy with Tony. Thor’s still a crater in one of the buildings.

Suddenly, she sees Natasha, red hair flying as she climbs out to the open door of the gunship. Her eyes are dark and clear, completely focused. For a moment, she looks at Pepper.

And then, Pepper knows. She knows why Tony insisted on doing this, why he couldn’t stop. Because no one could just wait and watch this happen and do nothing.

Pepper grits her teeth, and turns the repulsor behind her. The force of it blasts her almost into the opposite building, but she manages to turn, juddering, towards the gunship.

Which is when the repulsor jerks and shudders, the output spitting. It’s running out of power, and unlike Tony, she doesn’t have an arc reactor.

She’s only meters away when Natasha jumps. A huge tail hits the gunship the next instant. The gunship ruptures into the fireball, but the tail keeps going, cutting down towards them. Pepper cuts the output almost without thinking and plummets, shards and debris hailing down around her.

Pepper twists, the windows flashing past her. She’s rolling, flailing, the ground roaring up. Beside her, Natasha is falling like a parachutist, arms and legs outstretched. She turns her head, red hair flaming out behind her. Reaches out one hand-

Pepper grits her teeth, forces down the panic and forces herself limp. There is nothing to fight. There is nothing she can punch or kick, all she can do is stay calm.

It’s a struggle to lock down the raging instinct, but she gets her hand out, her manicured fingers brush over Natasha’s soft gloves.

There’s nothing soft about her grip. Natasha’s eyes are wide, her mouth moves but the wind rips them away. Pepper-

“I got you-“ Pepper can’t even hear her own words. The ground is rearing up to meet them. She can see the concrete, the rubble from the shattered tower. Steve, horrified, staring at them as they fall. Natasha’s mouth twists, I’m sorry.

Now. Pepper pulls Natasha against her with her free hand, drops the repulsor towards the ground, and fires.

It manages one last blast, kicking them up a few feet, then dies entirely. They fall. They fall two meters to the ground. Natasha pulls them both into a roll that leaves Pepper winded and breathless, but only bruised.
“Look out!” Steve roars, then dives over to them. He throws up his shield, braces knees on the ground. There’s a hideous crash, crunch and pieces of glass and concrete and alien flesh falls around them. Pepper grabs Natasha and pulls her under the cover of Steve’s shield as a huge claw smashes the concrete beside them to pieces.

Steve looks down at them, tries a shaky smile. Pepper smiles back. Natasha smiles at her. Then she remembers. “Tony!” She tries her earpiece, but it’s gone, lost in the fall. “Steve-“

“Rhodey-“ Steve calls, then coughs as the dust starts to fill their little shelter.

Rhodey doesn’t have time to look at the tower as the monster crashes down to it. He can only hope Pepper, Clint and Romanov made it out in time- he can just about see the Hulk in the corner of his eye on the thing’s back, punching out whatever life was left in it. Between the two of them, it’s been too much for the Tesseract, and the portal is shrinking, cutting out.

And Tony, Tony is falling.

He’s falling limp, spinning in mid-air. Rhodey kicks all power to his feet and dives for him and oh fuck it’s not enough and Tony’s falling and Thor’s still getting free from the rubble and the Hulk is too far away and oh god he’s going hit to the ground and oh no dear god Tony-

He might not be interested in Omegas, but there’s no forcing back the millenias of instinct screaming protect and defend and he’s going as fast as he can and he still isn’t going to make it-

An alien bike suddenly rears into view on his nine. Rhodey jerks up instinctively, and it roars past, a silver and green blur, and hits Tony straight on.

Tony rolls over the front of it, and Loki- Loki- grabs one arm, is nearly pulled straight off the bike by the weight of the armour. “What are you waiting for?! He screams at Rhodey. “You pathetic, idiotic, mewling-“

Rhodey doesn’t let him finish, diving down and grabbing Tony around the waist. He’s dead weight and his suit’s not in great shape, so he can only brace Tony against the bike as Loki brings it down in sudden jerks to a bone-jarring stop on the tarmac.

“Tony!” It’s Pepper and Natasha, stumbling and covered in dust, Steve at their heels, his black uniform grey with rubble, the paint scraped off his shield. Pepper drops down next to Tony, pulls off his faceplate. His eyes are closed, he isn’t moving.

Rhodey stumbles away, looking around wildly. The wreckage and devastation seems endless, although Rhodey knows this block has had the worst of it. There are bodies everywhere, the stench of the ghastly things makes him gag. And even then, that’s the least of it. The missile, the bomb that would have taken out Manhattan, the bomb Tony might have died saving them from.

God, Tony was right. He was right. Rhodey can’t be part of this anymore. He grabs the helmet.

“General Ross?”

There’s a crackle at the other end, Rhodey doesn’t wait to hear what he has to say. “I’m done. My tour was finished last year. Don’t expect me or the suit back.”
He throws the helmet down in disgust. Everyone is staring at him.

“Hope that wasn’t for me, honeybuns. “

Rhodey looks down, Tony is smiling weakly. “’Cause if this was some final tribute to my memory, I got some bad news for you.”

Rhodey can’t help it, the laugh breaks free, half choked. “Next time, you ride with me, okay?”

“And miss seeing the army they were sending after us-“ Tony’s voice wobbles, he sits up shakily. “Shit.”

Loki shifts, Rhodey turns, in case he’s about to try something, but he just sits down hard on the bike. Which explodes.

Tony yelps, Rhodey jumps, repulsors up to fire. Natasha shoves Pepper down and Steve throws up his shield just in time for Loki to bounce off it.

“Not so cocky now, bastard?” Clint has another arrow nocked, “What the fuck did you do to Phil?”

Rhodey had thought Coulson was scary, but then, protective Alphas are meant to be scary. Protective Omegas, however, are cold and still and murderous and there is a sort of calm rage in his eyes which is even worse.

“Which one was he?” Loki has to be suicidal, his voice is high, taunting.

“My Alpha, you piece of shit-“ The arrow thumps between his outstretched legs. loki migth not be Alpha, but no one can be unmoved by that threat.

“Loki, shut up.” Rhodey steps forwards. “Clint, Omega castration has been illegal for over a century.”

“Fuck that,” he breathes. “What did you do to him, you bastard? What did you do?”

“The balding fool in the suit?” Loki sneers, and either Asgardians are tougher that so far indicated, or Loki really doesn’t want to have kids. “He was brave, I’ll give him that.” He smiles, nastily. “He’ll live.”

“Okay.” Rhodey hurries over and closes a hand firmly over Clint’s bow before he can fire another arrow into Loki’s smug face. “Right now, until Thor gets out of that big crater, this is potentially an interplanetary incident. This idiot fought with us and saved Tony, so no arrows to the face.”

“You saved me? Aww, Drunk Kitty, I didn’t know you cared.”

“Be silent.”

“And there you were being all ‘bow to me pathetic mortals’, when really, inside-“

“Shut up.”

Maybe deciding that dealing with Tony is far worse than anything he could inflict, Clint takes a deep breath, and lets it out with a shudder, his hands go limp on the bow, his head drops forwards. Another breath, it’s not quite a sob.

“I’m sorry.” Rhodey says softly. “Tony, when you’re through annoying the megalomaniac norse
god, please check in on Coulson, make sure he’s okay.”

“He was alive when last I left him.” Loki puts in begrudgingly.

Clint nods. He stumbles, and his legs buckle. Natasha is at his side, barely seeming to move- there one moment, here the next, and helps him sit down.

“Um, Jarvis says he's in hospital.” Tony sits up stiffly, pulls at a suit release to get it off. “Not great, but he’s telling the truth.”

Clint nods, is very still for a moment, then is sick in the gutter. Natasha puts an arm around him.

Rhodey looks around. There’s the crackle of lighting around a nearby building, so Thor is probably fine. Him, Steve, Natasha, Clint, Pepper, Tony, Loki- who are they missing?

A deafening bellow high above them. The Hulk is on the top of the Empire State building again. He has impaled the severed head of the giant alien creature on the zeppelin spike, and *roars* at the deep, empty sky in challenge.
In which Tony looks for somewhere to live

Chapter Summary

With the Tower gone, the Avengers need somewhere to live.

Pepper has an idea. Tony doesn't like it.

Then Tony has an idea. Pepper isn't too sure about it, but it might just work.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for whiski for the beta read!

The tower is uninhabitable, the top twenty stories are pretty much gone, and it’s going to take a while before it’s back in one piece.

We have to stay somewhere, Tony.

And yeah, Tony might have a few places, but now they’ve got a disoriented Steve and a Rhodey who can’t go back to the barracks and a Clint who’s not allowed back anywhere near SHIELD until he’s had half a million evaluations and a Natasha who isn’t going anywhere without him and a Bruce just shrugged when he was asked if he had anywhere left to go and-

But not here. Fuck, not here. Tony closes his eyes a moment as Happy turns the last corner. Bad enough when Pepper just wanted him to have it cleared out so they could sell the real estate. He doesn’t want to see it. It’s been twenty years, and he can’t. They can’t make him. He’s going to sit here, with his eyes closed, and he’s going to tell Pepper they can’t stay here.

He’s going to lie to Pepper. He can feel her beside him, still and calm. She doesn’t understand and she can’t of course, but-

He thinks of Jarvis. He really wishes she could.

“Uh, boss?” Happy’s voice is hesitant. “Are you seeing this?”

“No,” Tony grits out. “Can we go now?”

He’s a multibillionaire. He can not look at his childhood house- his father’s house- if he doesn’t want to.

“You’d better take a look at this.”

He can’t. He doesn’t want to. He can’t he can’t he can’t-

Tony opens his eyes. Blinks.
And laughs.

Happy looks back at him in concerns as he wriggles in the back seat, howling helplessly. Pepper huffs in exasperation. “Tony, this isn’t funny.”

“It is!” Tony wipes his eyes, “It totally is! It’s perfect, remind me to buy Loki something nice- a Solomon island or something-“

“We can’t stay here.”

“We were never going to.” Tony opens the car door gets out, looks out at the old mansion.

He hasn’t been back there since he was seventeen, since he’d fled to Malibu away from- away. He hasn’t touched it since. It still had everything there. All the furniture. Howard’s workshop. The dining room. The sixth floor balcony. The locks with no keys.

And now, all that, plus the roof is caved in, three stories are gone and a massive alien whale is sprawled across three quarters of the wreckage.

“Is there anything we should even try and salvage, or do we just bulldoze?” Pepper grumbles, getting out beside him.

“Bulldoze.” Tony grins. “Bulldoze, scoure, and purge with fire and salt. Can we borrow some napalm from Rhodey?”

“No, Tony.”

She’s still looking distinctly disgruntled when they get back in the car, pulling out a tablet to look up other options- or maybe finding contractors to pulls down the remains of the mansion. “I’m not having you lot in my tower all the time.”

“Not even Natasha?” Tony teases.

“I’m not answering that.”

“You know Loki was after the reactor, not us, right?”

“Tony, right now I’m moving heaven and earth to recoup our PR losses, having you all hanging around is not good for our stock prices.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll find something until we can get a proper building done. Natasha will miss you.” I’ll miss you, he doesn’t say.

“I didn’t say I was planning to live in the tower.” Pepper smiles, coyly.

Tony looks at her, Pepper looks away, there’s a bit of smugness there. And- sure, booty calls, that’s definitely a reason, but-

He thinks of seeing her, in the tower, just as everything went down. Her face set in determination, the repulsor closed around her wrist as if it belonged there, as though it had been made for her.

“Pepper?” It’s careful. He’s got to be careful. If he fucks this up-

He can’t. He has to get this right. It’s too wonderful to fail.

“You were- really good with the repulsor,” He tests, cautiously.
“Thanks.” Pepper shakes her head. “It was-“ she trails off, shakes her head again and yes, yes that’s a good fucking sign. “I can maybe see why you’d-“

“Do you want one?” Tony blurts out and of fucking hell why- he’s fucked it up. “I could make you a suit, no problem, I have your measurements from that pantsuit you left in my room that Heat, I could totally-“ he forces his mouth shut, appalled. Why does he fuck this up? Why does he always fuck this up? There has to be a medical condition for it.

But Pepper doesn’t look at him in annoyance or no Tonys him or tell Happy to stop the car so he can walk back to their hotel. She’s quiet, staring out of the car windshield in front as though she hadn’t heard him.

Maybe the universe was being nice, and she somehow hadn’t. Which means Tony immediately decides to squander this last chance. “It’s- it really is amazing, Peps. You can fly, and you’re pretty much indestructible, and you feel-“ strong, powerful, safe, as though no one can hurt you- he doesn’t say.

Pepper doesn’t say anything and for a moment Tony can only look at her, hopelessly hopeful. Please say yes please say yes.

“Can you make it look like a statue?” Pepper says instead.

Tony blinks, “Uh, yeah?”

“I’m not going to join your little team,” Pepper continues.

Tony tries to hold back his smile, because- that’s not a no. “If you want something to keep your tower safe-“

“Apparently that’s something we need to worry about nowadays.” Pepper sighs. She looks at Tony, smiles sadly, “I still don’t like this.”

Just wait until you start doing it. “I know, but it’s worth it.”

“But not red and gold.” Pepper smiles.

“Sure, what colour?”

Pepper hesitates. “Am I doing this?”

“Please do?”

“White.”

“White and red?”

“Fine, if you want.”

Tony’s fingers itch, his brain itches. He wants to make and he wants to do it now.

He pulls out his phone, he’ll salvage what’s left of his tower’s lab and have the rest shipped in from Malibu overnight. Pep’s getting her suit tomorrow.
In which Tony doesn't need to have nightmares anymore

Chapter Summary

Tony entertains unexpected guests, and discovers new coping mechanisms.

The Mandarin Oriental is maybe not as nice as the tower, but until the construction crews finish rebuilding it, or until the demolition and rebuilding on 890 fifth avenue finishes, this is where they live.

He’s gone over the plans in person. It’s going to be amazing. It’s going to be perfect. It’s going to be another stain of his worthless past scrubbed out and replaced with something infinitely better.

But for now, they’ve got apartments in the best penthouse in New York, so that’s not bad.

Tony leans against the window, looking out over the city. The lights are bright and vivid.

Like stars.

Tony closes his eyes, but it doesn’t help. They’re still there- maybe not that ship, but others. Maybe far away, maybe so far away they could never come back here in his lifetime, but-

Tony sighs and sips his coffee.

“Sir?” Jarvis asks softly. He’s installed himself in the security system and Tony’s set up webcams where he can, but it’s not the same. Tony knows he’s looking forward to being in the new complex, or back in the tower, or anywhere he can feel more at home. “You have a visitor.”

Tony looks up. He isn’t surprised. “Hi Drunk Kitty, got away from Thor?”

Loki pouts, but doesn’t dignify that with an answer. “He is fighting for me with the All-Father, he needn’t know.”

Tony wonders if he should suggest breaking parole isn’t a great idea but- you know what? He doesn’t care. “Wanna drink? We got coffee, a full bar, or I could get you a saucer of milk if that’s more your style.”

“Will you stop that?” Loki helps himself to the milk so- huh, maybe he is a kind of cat. He uses a mug at least. “What are you doing about- our mutual threats?”

Yeah. Tony closes his eyes. “Not sleeping.” He lifts his mug is a mock toast. “You?”

Maybe it’s not real- just a disguise or glamour, but Loki doesn’t look like he’s been sleeping either. “You should be doing something,” He hisses. “Do you think they won’t be back?”

“We’re studying the tech the Chitauri used but- I’m guessing that’s not who you mean.”

Loki just stares in his mug as though trying to read fortunes in milk. “No.”

“And I’m guessing you’re not going to give up a heads up on who or what that is, so we can do something before whatever it was turns up and- I don’t know, eats the Earth or blows it up or turns
everyone into earthworms?”

No answer. “Yeah, thought not.”

“He is still watching,” Loki says softly, like maybe if he doesn’t say it too loud they won’t be overheard. “I feel his eyes on me.”

“Can he be more pissed at you right now?” Tony sips his mug. “We’re still dredging that lake for your sceptre by the way. Still can’t find it.”

Loki sighs, shoulders slumped- then disappears out so suddenly Tony is left blinking. He looks down at his mug, wondering if he’s actually progressing to having caffeine hallucinations.

Clint is in the doorway. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No.” Tony closes his eyes, leans his head back against the window- then opens them again against the stars flaring in the dark behind his eyes. “Loki being annoying. And he stole a glass.”

Clint nods stiffly, steps in and heads to the fridge. “Milk’s on the table.” Tony puts in “Kinda wanted to see what coffee you guys have.” Clint sighs, he looks just as tired as Tony.

“We’ve got Pepper’s tar, Rhodey’s serious tar, and my serious black tar gunk. How bad is it?”

“Bad.” Clint slides in beside him. “Any more in your pot?”

Tony pours it out. Clint’s head thumps against the window, closes his eyes. He’s a bit too close. No, that’s not right. He’s basically leaning on Tony’s shoulder but- that feels okay. Actually, that feels pretty good.

Something about being so close to another Omega slowly unknots a hell of a lot of tension Tony hadn’t even known he’d been holding in his spine. He smells warm and comforting and sweet. Tony thinks of Yinsen, feels the old stab of guilt and pain- almost reassuring now, after this time.

Clint must feel something of it too, because he turns his face into Tony’s hair and takes a deep breath- then stops. He sighs. “Sorry. Loki isn’t helping, and- with Phil still in IC, it’s just been- you know.”

“No.” Tony shrugs, “Not really.”

“I thought you are Rhodes-“

Tony blinks, “What- hey, no. He doesn’t- um.” He’s not sure if he should out Rhodey, but Clint just shrugs it off.

“My bad. Sorry.” Clint’s eyes drift closed, then he starts awake. “Shit.” He reaches for his mug.

Tony looks at the mug. He thinks of Yinsen again. He had barely known Tony, had probably not liked him a whole lot- what with Gulmira. But he’d helped him through a Heat. Had been there, had let Tony get close and take comfort from him. He edges back into Clint’s side and he exhales softly, relaxing a little more against him.

“If there’s anything I can do-“ Tony tries.

Clint looks at him, sighs, closes his eyes. “Not unless you want to do the Omega commune thing?”
Tony blinks at him, “What, sleep together?”

“Well- yeah.” Clint shrugs. “I spent a lot of time in communes, and then there was Phil so- yeah, not used to sleeping alone.”

Tony thinks it over. “Yeah, that’s okay. Want me to get Bruce?”

Clint blinks at him. “Uh- yeah? You’re okay with that?”

Tony looks down at the coffee, then at Clint. Just being close to him helps. “Um, just to warn you, I have some pretty bad- the portal-”

“Yeah.” Clint nods, eyes closing as he tilts his head back. “Turns out, being mind controlled? Really sucks.”

“Okay.” Tony tries to think. “I think this place has a Heat room? Third floor? Wanna go and I’ll get Bruce if he’s still up?”

“Yeah, okay.” Clint gets up stiffly, gives a weak smile. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

There’s light under the door to Bruce’s suite. Tony knocks. “Brucie?”

“Hello Stark.” Bruce opens the door, he’s got his glasses on, a pen in hand. “Want to help with quadratic equations at 3am?”

“Nah, Clint wants some bed company, want to join?”

Bruce seems to perk up, then sag. “That’ll probably not be safe.”

Tony shrugs. “You think we’re gonna set off the Hulk when we’re asleep? Then what’s the difference between being in the same bed or on the same floor?”

Bruce sighs, and shrugs. “I’d really like that.” He gives Tony a lopsided grin. “I haven’t dared go to a commune since- the other guy.”

“Well, I’ve never been to one, so I’m kinda hoping you guys’ll show me how it’s done.” They head out to the elevators.

“Never?” Bruce smiles at him, tiredly. “Regret hiding for so long now?” There’s a slight edge there.

Tony looks at him, he does not need this at three in the morning. “I’m alive,” he says flatly.

Bruce looks at him, then closes his eyes. “I’m sorry. I can hardly judge.”

The doors open, and- oh wow.

“This place is the best.” Clint grins, rolls over and over on the masses of mattresses and pillows, head up to scent mark.
Tony takes his shoes off, drops down on all fours and pads over to lie down beside Clint.

“Better if you take your clothes off.” Bruce picks up a pile of plush quilts and duvets.

“Can I hang on to my underpants?”

“Whatever you want, Tony.”

The fabric and sheets are soft and smooth against his skin. Tony arches his back, rubs head and neck and – yeah, he takes his underpants off too, gets his scent on the cushions and mattress and blankets.

He can smell Clint, and Bruce too, rich and hot and much more there than with clothes between them. Clint rolls over and presses his nose into Tony’s pillow. “God, that’s good.” He sighs. “Can we sleep now?”

After three cups of coffee, probably not, but it’s funny, when Bruce settles in on Clint’s other side and room’s scent settles into the three of them, the weariness hits like a brick. Tony closes his eyes, starts them open again as stars flash before his eyes and- someone is watching. He doesn’t know who. Maybe one day, Loki might tell him.

Maybe Thor’s got him back in Asgard, maybe he’s still loose on Earth. Tony sighs. It feels unfair to Clint, but he does hope Loki’s somewhere safe. He’s done awful things, and Phil’s not getting out of hospital for a few more weeks, but- Tony’s been there. He hopes whatever it is that saw him, in the portal, is far away from all of them.

“Hey.” Tony blinks, Clint puts an arm around him. “Best part of communes? You can stop thinking.”

The scent of him. Of Bruce. It sinks into him, hits something hindbrain that whispers good, safe, warm, happy. God, it feels good, it feels wonderful, it’s like what it had been with Yinsen only- not in Afghanistan. He’d wondered what it would be like, in a safe place.

Now he knows. It’s better than he could have imagined.

“Sorry Clint.” Bruce rolls over them, for a moment, his weight’s on Tony, heavy and solid and here and good good good. “Like this.” And puts an arm around both of them.

“Come on,” Clint stretches an arm around both their heads, “You’re in a sandwich, Tony, don’t be a stranger.”

Tony closes his eyes, rolls on his side and puts an arm around Clint, feels Bruce's arm around the two of them tighten. They're warm, safe, this is the closest he's been to anyone for the best part of a year. Since Pepper. The first time he's been close to another Omega since Yinsen.

He closes his eyes.

This time, they stay closed.
In which Tony learns about Heat Caretaking

Chapter Summary

Clint needs a hand, and Bruce and Tony are happy to help.

Tony opens his eyes, confused for a moment.

There'd been a nightmare. With Howard and Obi and Pepper was there for some reason and they'd put a tracking device under his skin and he was trapped and oh god what were they going to do to him-

Then he'd climbed out of a window, dug the tracker out with a knife and tossed it into a truck going to Memphis, and was just about to break into a garage to set up a makeshift suit when he woke up.

That's... not how the nightmares usually go.

The hot, fierce smell of Heat hits him the next moment and oh no, not again.

But he had his Heat last month, a few weeks before the Chitauri attack, and he should still have another month-

Then Clint groans, raw and desperate and- oh, right.

Tony sits up awkwardly. "Um."

"Shut up," Clint grits out. "Don't say anything unless you want to give a hand."

"Um," Tony repeats, intelligently. Clint is naked, arching half off the mattress. Even in the dim lights his skin is flushed. He kicks off the blankets, rolls over and starts rutting against the sheets with a growl. The fabric is already stained dark where he'd been lying on it. "Jarvis? I think we need a heat kit."

The smell of him, of Heat and slick and sex and sweat and- Tony can't even catalogue it. It slams straight into his brain as pure solid good and he feels his mouth go dry, shifts as he starts to go slick himself, cock perking up eagerly.

"Fuck." Clint groans, and it's wretched. Tony reaches out almost without thinking- to do what, he has no idea.

"Come on." Bruce sits up next to him. "Here, like this." He slides over to Clint and touches his back. Just with fingertips at first, then with his hand when Clint doesn't respond. He starts to stroke him steadily, up and down. "It's okay."

"Fuck," Clint nearly sobs. "Phil-

"I'm sorry," Bruce says softly. "I'm sure he would do anything to be here."

“One fucking Heat a year,” Clint snarls, “And that fucking asshole puts him in hospital. Gonna have to wait another fucking year-”
Bruce catches Tony's eye, jerks his head, *come on.*

Fuck. he can do this. Of course he can do this, he's Tony Stark. Millionaire playboy philanthropist. *Slut* to most of the press. Except- except he last fucked an Omega four years ago, and he was drunk and high on destrogel and can't even remember most of it, and he can only stare at Bruce's hands; so gentle, and think of how Yinsen touched him; getting him through his Heat and think- *oh shit I am going to fuck this up completely.*

He shifts over anyway, looks pleadingly at Bruce, who at least seems to know what he's doing. *What do I do?*

"Want us to look after you?"

"Unless you're filming for a fucking porno *yeah* fucking hell-"

Bruce looks at him, shrugs, mouths *hormones.*

Right, Yinsen had said some people got grouchy in heat-

And why is Tony's only touchpoint with basic Omega interaction from a *fucking cave in fucking Afghanistan when he had a fucking car battery in his chest?*

He graduated MIT at 17 and got his first doctorate at 20, but right now Tony feels in desperate need of an education.

"We're going to need you to turn over, Clint."

Clint growls and grumbles, but flops on his back, his body is shining with sweat, his eyes are too bright and his cock is rock hard and pressed up against his belly. Tony tries to school his face into something resembling confidence and not the *ah fuck ah fuck I'm gonna make a mess of this* he really feels.

"If you two are just going to sit there-"

"Tony," Bruce says as he gives him a shove, "Keep his mouth busy, I don't need a running commentary. I'll take care of the rest."

Busy? Clint hardly looks in the mood to give him a blowjob. Tony looks at Clint, who glowers back, then shrugs and bends down for a kiss.

And with that, Clint just *melts.* Arches up into Tony's mouth, hungry and open and *sweet.* Liquid sweet like corn syrup and the richest hot chocolate and cool melted sugar all at once until Tony's teeth tingle with it, can taste Clint on his tongue and lips. Clint's hands come up and brace on Tony's shoulders, his cheek- already with a bit of stubble, lucky bastard- scraping against Tony's hard-earned beard.

It's barely even kissing. Opened mouths pressed to each other, Clint panting and Tony not far behind because oh fucking hell this is hot. This is hotter than any porno or one night stand he's had. It's wet and slobbery and probably looks completely stupid to anyone watching but it's so wild and hot and *real* and Tony's so very hard right now and he's gotta be soaking the bedding-

Clint yelps suddenly, teeth snapping closed on Tony's upper lip. Tony jerks back, the pain jerking him back to himself without warning. "Fuck-"

"Clint." Bruce sits up from where he'd been crouched between Clint's knees, his legs hooked over
his shoulders. "Kick me again and you're going to have the other guy here, and I really wouldn't recommend that."


Bruce catches Tony's eyes, smiles in a long-suffering kind of way- but there's a glow there too, he licks his lips and he smells of Clint now, and so does Tony and- it's really fucking good.

Then he bends down and gets back to eating Clint out and Clint yowls, shuddering, until Tony bends down to kiss him again, and then they're too busy to make much noise.

He can taste Clint, taste him all the way down his throat and it's like Tony's drinking him and being drunk by him at the same time and he's lightheaded and dizzy and his body's just chanting good good good all the way through him and it's wonderful and god did he actually miss out on eighteen years of this?

He lets his hands wander across Clint's body. He's taut with muscle, more than even Tony's managed to put on and no wonder. Tony tried drawing Clint's bow once, and his back still hasn't forgiven him. His fingers map out pectorals, biceps, abdominals, down to join Bruce's hand where it's wrapped around Clint's cock.

Tony pulls up for air, swallows, his skin tingles, prickles with pleasure, his mouth and chin are wet with saliva and he licks his lips hungrily, relishing the taste of the two off them. Between Clint's thighs, Bruce has one hand wrapped with Tony's, jerking Clint off, the other buried out of sight inside him.

"Ah god- fuck-" Clint jerks up and comes, across both their hands and his own stomach, he curls up with the force of it, shudders and give an incoherent yell, then collapses back down, blinking up at the ceiling.

Bruce slides up a little, and lies down on Clint, his head pillowed on his flat stomach. "It's okay," he waves Tony down to do the same, "It's all good."

"Phil-" It's hoarse, Clint shudders.

Tony remembers how it had felt, the Heats he'd spent alone. He lies down on Clint's chest, rests his head on his shoulder and smiles.

"We've got you," Bruce continues, softly, "You're completely safe. You're in the best place you could be. Phil will be back very soon."

"We're here." Tony tries, and it seems to work, Clint slowly settles back more calmly on the sheets, closes his eyes-

Then groans and starts up again, Tony can feel his heartbeat speed up, the roaring scent of Heat increasing again. Wave number two.

Tony hopes Jarvis can get some food and water up here fast, they're going to be here for a while.
In which there are secrets and drinks and bad decisions, and Steve and Jarvis have a chat

Chapter Summary

In vino veritas.

Or, why Steve wishes Tony (and Bruce and Clint) wouldn’t get drunk.

“Moonchildren.”
“Sorry?”
“That’s what Loki called them, Moonchildren. Children people don’t want.”
“I can’t believe you actually have chats with that freak.”

Clint takes a long draw from his beer, Tony shrugs. “I just consider it like getting info. He’s stuck on Earth now, so I guess he doesn’t want it to get too badly wrecked.”

“That’s new,” Clint grits out.

Bruce doesn’t say anything, just takes a renewed drink.

“What would he know about it anyway?”
“No idea, but you know he’s not Thor’s actual brother right?”

“Duh, have you smelled them? Not even the same fucking species.” Clint gets up and goes to the drinks island the Mandarin Oriental has kindly provided. “I’m going to need something stronger if we’re talking about this.”

“Make mine a vodka martini.”

“Do I look like a barmaid, Stark?”

“Gin and tonic.” Bruce puts in, without looking up.

Clint looks between the two of them. Tony smirks. “Didn’t you learn anything in undercover work?”

With a long suffering sigh, Clint puts the drinks together. “You’re only getting one ‘cause I like vodka martinis, alright?”

“You should come drinking with me and Pepper.”

“And do you want something, Steve-“ Tony tosses over to the couch.

“Keep it down, he’s asleep.” Clint brings the drinks over to the table. “I think it’s the first time I’ve seen him sleep.”

“Super soldier.” Tony drinks his martini.
“Do you think he might want in on the communal sleeping thing?”

“No,” Bruce and Tony snap at the same time, then look at each other.

“Jeez, fine.” Clint sits down, “What’s up with you anti-alpha omeganazis-“
Bruce downs his drink in one, and throws the plastic cup at Clint, it bounces off his shoulder.

“I agree with Clint,” Tony says, Bruce looks around for something else to throw, “We are way not drunk enough for this.”

“I have never-“ Tony slurs as he wobbles with one finger raised uncertainly, “Had a fivesome.”
Both Bruce and Clint drink. Tony goggles. “Big commune,” Bruce explains, “lots of fun when you’re in heat.”

“And the newspapers think I’m sleeping around-“ His legs wobble, he sits back down hard.

“I have never-“ Clint raises his glass, “Bonded.” He drinks.

“Is that how it works?” Tony frowns. “I thought you only say things you haven’t done-“

“It’s a drinking game Stark- Bruce!”

“Tony,” Tony corrects.

“But-“ Clint points to Bruce, who has just set his emptied shot glass down. “I thought you-“
Tony dredges his somewhat pickled brain. “Betty- Ross, right? You published together?”
Bruce nods, a small smile at Tony.

“She’s an Omega!” Clint frowns.

Bruce sighs and stands up. “I have never been a homophobic asshole.”
Tony has to put the glass to Clint’s mouth to get him to drink.

He’s going to regret this. The knowledge is there but drowned so deep Tony ignores it.

“I have never run away from home.” Clint and Bruce both drink.

Tony stares at his glass, wondering if his aborted ’91 attempt counts. “I tried?”

“Drink.”
Tony does, the pleasant fuzziness of being completely smashed files off the worst edges of those memories.

“I have never-“ Bruce wavers, nearly falls over and his eyes briefly flash green, “hated my father.”

They all drink. Tony looks around for something stronger. Clint pours him the straight vodka from the freezer. Man, he’s gonna regret this.

“I have never-“ Tony tries to think, but his brain seems entirely stuck in ’91 so he just blurts it out, “had an abortion.”

This time, he is the only one who drinks. Bruce shrugs, Clint pats him on the back.

Clint pours. “I have never tried to off myself.”

Eh, he’s come close enough that it counts. They all drink. Bruce shrugs. “The other guy.”

Bruce lifts his glass. “I will never have kids.” It’s a statement.

He drinks, Clint doesn’t. Tony blinks. “I have kids. I have Dummy and Butterfingers and Jarvis-“

“Robots don’t count, Tony.” Clint shrugs.

Tony looks down at his glass. They do. They so utterly do.

“I never-“ he squints at his glass, “got to say what I felt at a family funeral.”

Clint and Bruce laugh. They all drink. It feels good, like- letting it go. All this weight and those horrible secrets.

“I have never-“ Clint tries to lean back, and nearly falls off his chair. “Had my father try and kill me.”

And dear fucking god they all drink. Tony because eh, close enough, but Bruce throws it back with gusto, and Clint nearly spills his down his front.

Bruce gives a cold, nasty smile, the sort Tony has only seen in the mirror and on Loki’s face. Nothing funny and all hideous. “I have never-“ he says as he refills their shot glasses, “killed my father.”

“Wooo-“ Clint toasts Bruce as he slugs his down. Tony looks down at his glass. Did he? Sometimes he wonders. Howard drove drunk so often and nothing had happened until just that night. Maybe he’d done something and blanked it out.

They are looking at him, it’s his turn. “I have never-“ the light catches through the glass, the sluggish liquid inside. For a moment he thinks of his mother, the morning after- after. Sitting at that fucking dining table. Her hands on the stitched flowers on the tablecloth. Drinking vodka at breakfast.

Fuck it.

“I have never been raped by my father.” He drinks.

Bruce shakes his head, staring down at his glass. Clint blinks at him, eyes glazed.

His glass clatters to the table.

“Is that the-“ Bruce waves a hand at him. “Abortion?”
“Yup.” It’s not his turn, but Tony drinks anyway, straight from the bottle.

“You win everything.” Clint points a wavering finger at Tony and Bruce. “This competition is over. You two can have the fucking bar.”

Tony laughs, it crackles and snaps in his throat. He slumps across the table, knocking over Bruce’s glass.

“I’m getting another drink,” Bruce slurs, staggering to his feet. He stumbles over to a drinks island, tries to grab a bottle, misses, knocks it over. He tries to get a glass and a stack of them smash to the floor. Bruce looks at the mess he’s made, and Hulks out.

Tony blinks as the drinks island is knocked over, the bottles and glasses shattering to icicles on the floor. The Hulk slumps down on his backside and looks morosely at the mess.

“It’s okay, big guy. I’ll pay for it.” Tony manages to get out of his chair, the world lurches and his stomach threatens to upturn. The only good news is that Steve seems to be sleeping through the whole mess.

“HULK WANT SMASH.” The Hulk moans, “HULK WANT SMASH BAD GUYS.” He pats Tony on the head, “BAD GUYS HURT TIN MAN, BIRDY AND PUNY BRUCE.”

“Aww, it’s okay.” Tony sits next to him. “I flushed his ashes down a toilet. There’s nothing to smash.”

“BUT HULK WANT SMASH.” He’s pouting, it’s adorable. He quiet a moment, then- “HULK NOT FEEL GOOD.”

“Yeah.” Tony tries to pat his arm, misses. “S’what happens when you drink-“ Tony looks at the ruined drinks island, he has no idea what they’ve drunk. “Way too much.”

There’s silence. Tony looks up, and the Hulk has his eyes closed. The next moment a thunderous snore rips through the room and he slumps back on his back.

“Good idea.” Tony leans back against the Hulk’s side, pulls a massive arm around him like a blanket. “Coming Clint?”

“This is the stupidest thing we’ve done all night.” Clint moans, but slumps down on the Hulk’s other side. “And this night has been really fucking stupid.”

“Yep.” Tony closes his eyes, raises an imaginary glass. “I never will remember any of this.”

“Damn straight,” Clint mumbles.

The room is silent, even the Hulk’s snores have died to snuffles. All asleep, the three with eyes closed and bodies relaxed.

And Steve, lying stiff and unmoving on the sofa, eyes wide.
Steve picks his way carefully around the darkened hillock of the Hulk, slides around the pools of alcohol and broken glass, and finally darting the last three feet out of the door and closing the door behind him.

He slumps against it, breath coming in pants and oh god, he should not have heard that. He’d been dozing and it had been fine, he’s been listening to their game and it had been okay, and then- and then-

Then it had changed. The laughter turned high and brittle as glass, the slick sounds of alcohol, the scent of them sick and heavy with drunkenness. The voices slurred, roiling.

Look at my scars look at my bleeding wounds see me tear myself open do you see do you see do you see

Oh god he shouldn’t have seen.

Bruce. Clint. Tony. Oh god Tony.

He tried to kill me

He sounds like a complete failure of a human being.

Oh god oh god Tony. Tony and Howard and oh fucking god where did it all go so hideous? What the hell happened between then and now to turn everything so twisted and sick and wrong?

He should have been there. He could have prevented this, done- something to stop Howard, keep Tony safe. Dear god he was seventeen.

No wonder he had panicked when he learned who Steve was. No wonder Jarvis-

Steve pauses.

“Jarvis?” he asks softly.

“Yes Captain?” His voice is cold.

“How much of that did you hear?”

“Unfortunately, I believe we both heard all of it.”

Steve exhales and closes his eyes. Tries to think past what he had heard. The moment stretches. If he says the wrong thing, everything he has here, this fragile, spun glass peace, will be gone.

“What should I do?” he says finally.

There’s a pause. Then, “Never speak of this to anyone,” Jarvis says finally.

Steve nods. “I’m not sure I could.” He doesn’t think he’ll be able to say a word of it without being sick. “What about- Tony?”

Another pause. “If he brings it up, then tell him. If not- there is no reason to remind him of that time. He will not remember this evening.”

Steve nods again. He pushes himself off the doors, wavers a little before he catches his balance. He swallows, and keeps his dinner down. “Did you know?” he manages.
“About Sir? Yes.” Jarvis’ voice is heavy, he sounds- tired? Could a machine be tired? “We all know.”

“Has Tony seen- has he spoken to-“ Steve isn’t sure how to finish the sentence.

“How?” And god, Jarvis is tired. Tired and sick to his circuitry heart. “Who can he trust? Do you know how much the tabloids would pay for this kind of- of-“ Jarvis must have the entirety of every human language at his command, but he cannot find the right word.

Steve nods wearily. He stares down at the floor, feels hideously tired himself but cannot imagine going to sleep. God, what a group they were. Tony, and Clint and Bruce’s horrors. And him- seventy years gone, his friends all dead or turned into monsters. No wonder Rhodey is leading them- he’s the only one who’s sane.

Steve steps into the elevator, and slumps against the wall and closes his eyes again as the doors close.

“Captain?” Jarvis’ voice is- strangely hesitant, almost soft.

Steve opens his eyes, “Yes Jarvis?”

“How did you-“ he breaks off. “I wondered, now you know, if you could-“ another crackle of static.

Steve waits.

“You knew him.” Jarvis says finally, heavily. No need to ask who he is. “Could you- have imagined it? Did you know what kind of- of human he was?”

Steve opens his mouth. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t want to remember. Every memory of Howard is tainted now. He can’t recall them without hearing Tony.

I have never been raped by my father.

“No.” He says finally. “I wouldn’t have been friends with him if I did.” He thinks of Howard’s leer at Peggy, how she pulled away from him. “He was- backwards. About Omegas.” God, why hadn’t he done something? Why hadn’t he spoken up, told him to leave Peggy alone, made it clear this was not okay?

Would it have made a difference?

“Clearly.” Jarvis’ voice is flat.

“I- I can-“ He doesn’t want to say it, it’s foul. It feels almost... traitorous to the memories of the past. He forces the words out anyway. “I can- can barely believe it.” God, what had Howard been thinking? What can you possibly do to convince yourself that sort of thing was right?

Howard wasn’t the Red Skull. He wasn’t insane. Could alcohol twist someone that much?

“I am sorry,” Jarvis says suddenly, breaking him out of his lost thoughts, “this is a vile conversation. I should not be asking this of you.”

“It’s okay.” The lift stops at his floor, the doors open. “I guess- you don’t have anyone to talk about it?”

“No,” Jarvis says softly, “I am sorry.”

Steve hesitates, then puts a hand on the lift controls. If Jarvis had a body, Steve would be touching
his arm or shoulder, or maybe even pulling him into a hug. As it is, he wonders if Jarvis can feel this. “It’s okay.”

It’s not. It’s so far not okay and they are all still hurting. All of them. So broken. Steve sighs, and turns to walk out into his own apartments.

“Captain?” Jarvis’ voice comes from the elevator, fading a little as the doors close.

“Yes?” Steve turns, tries to smile.

“Thank you.”

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