

Glitter and Gold

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Glitter and Gold

by [Jana C](#)

Summary

Tony Stark knows he has a mission, and he knows he's the only one who can get it done - why else would Strange have saved him on Titan?

He is okay with that. He is okay with dying to bring everyone he loves back.

Surprisingly, though, he is not that okay with coming back.

Notes

Okay, so, a few warnings - first, this is WinterIron, and not Stony, which is what I usually go for, because the ship grabbed me and won't let me go. Second, the first chapter reads VERY anti-Steve, but that's because it's mostly Tony's POV - it's not bashing, because I do believe they all had their reasons, but Tony is hurt, and he's pissed, and he is not in a good place right now. Third, I just think it's best to add that, while no suicidal thoughts are explicit in this, Tony's way of viewing certain things can be constructed as such, so tread carefully if this is trigger for you - I'll put in some explanation at the end note, so you can decide if you want to read it or not.

I should have the next chapter ready in about a week, and the last one a week after that - I hope you enjoy it!

Have fun!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Infinity

GLITTER AND GOLD

“He did it.”

Her voice isn't quite human — or whatever it is she was before Thanos got a hold of her and turned her into a pile of parts held together by anger, betrayal and deep terror of the man who was once her father. It's not a comforting tone by any means — it's not even defeat, it's a simple statement.

He did it.

He did.

Half the universe is gone, and all Tony cares right now is the ashes clinging to the blood on his hands — no matter how far he runs, even so far away as another planet, another galaxy altogether — there always is, there always will be, blood on his hands.

X

He's not really sure what to expect when they get back to Earth, faster than he thought it would be, considering where they were, but Nebula is handy with ships, and he's a quick study in just about any kind of tech. It helps that she actually knows her way around Thanos's home planet, because she's his daughter, bred for killing and destruction. They take her team's ship out of there, and Tony hopes never to go back.

Tony doesn't ask what made her change her mind. He doesn't ask what made her and Gamora change sides, how come she wasn't with Quill when they came, and she returns the favor to some extent.

“Was he your son?” she asks evenly at some point, his eyes fixed ahead, at the vortex of speed and light they're hurdling through. Jokes about donuts and pop culture swarming his head.

“No,” he answers, the word seeming wrong in his voice.

He wonders where May is. If she's going to try to kill him, if she's ash by now, their tiny apartment in disrepair, no one to miss the two of them, because they were all the other had. Tony closes his eyes, and Nebula *gets* it, apparently. She keeps her silence, but there's an air of comprehension around her when she stares at him, and maybe it's because they are all the other has right now, maybe it's because they're both creatures who would rather fight their evils hands on than seek out answers by mysterious means as they have to do now, but she gets it, and she leaves it well alone.

When they descend on Earth, it's dark.

Tony knows they are at a point where Earth can actually track things getting too close to them, where they can intercept them, and question them, and not allow them through — invader ships apart — but no one even tries when they break through atmosphere, heading for the compound, because at least there, maybe, if he's lucky, there will be *some* kind of normalcy.

Half the universe is gone.

Everyone has a fifty-fifty chance of being either dead or alive.

The second they hesitate by the door of the ship before coming out is like Schrodinger's Earth — everyone Tony loves, everyone he cares about, is both dead and alive.

And then Rhodey comes out through the door, and he feels as if half his soul is returned to him at the sight. A breath he's been holding since Titan comes out of him, and he staggers out the ship towards his best friend, who has tears in his eyes, and grabs him by the shoulders, pulls him in, against his chest, like he had done years before, on the sands of Afghanistan. Rhodey holds him like he has no intention of letting Tony go, and now, now that he's on Earth, now that he's here, he feels safe in a way he has no right to feel.

Half the universe is gone, he thinks, but clings to Rhodey anyway.

Tony can feel the second Rhodey sees Nebula behind him, and he takes a step back, running a hand through his hair.

"So, weird story," he starts, trying to sound close to normal, and Rhodey sees through his attempt but keeps up with it, because this is *them*. It's their core, their base — before Pepper, before the Avengers, before Happy or anyone, *this man here* was the first to deem Tony worthy of being more than a step to stand on to get ahead.

"You think a blue chick is weird?" he asks in a low voice, gesturing behind them, where a raccoon is breaking ranks, heading straight for them.

"Nebula?" he says, and Tony would be shocked, and he'd make a joke, but he can't summon the energy right now.

He doesn't have any left.

The two of them stare at each other, and Nebula shakes her head once, a jerky motion that clearly betrays more emotion than she is used to, and the raccoon falters visibly.

"Groot?" she asks, and all the answer she gets is a loud intake of breath from the raccoon and a shake of his head, and Tony gets it, he does.

Of all the Guardians, they are the only two left. One who went with Thor, one who stayed behind.

"We thought you were dead."

The voice startles him so hard that Nebula has a weapon in her hand before Tony can even start to react, but he waves her down, and turns slowly, heart hammering in his chest — Rogers is right there, framed in the light of the door, pale and red eyed, but *there*, and as much as Tony would like to deny it, it is a relief that he hasn't vanished.

He keeps looking around, and Rhodey seems to feel what he's looking for.

"Tony..." his best friend says in a soft tone, and Tony does something he never thought he'd do in his life, in front of so many people, some of whom he doesn't even know: he falls to his knees, and he cries.

He cries in relief for having Rhodey right there beside him, and he cries in terror for what happened to all of them, and he cries in fear of what he has to accomplish now, and he cries in deep seated sadness, for the blood and ash on his hands that he hasn't yet brought himself to clean.

He cries.

Pepper is gone, but Rhodey is alive, and he is there with all the others because Thanos himself told him he wished they'd remember him. And amidst his tears, his sobbing breathing that he can't calm even when he tries, even when he feels Rhodey trying to pull him up, he promises himself that they will — they will remember him.

Thanos will remember him, and he will wish Tony were gone.

Suddenly there's a weight on his shoulder and he looks up, the sight of bright blue eyes, filled with tears, staring right at him almost breaks him again, but he holds it in, and Steve Rogers grips his shoulders in his hands, tears sliding down his face too as they both kneel on the grass, a spaceship behind them, an empty glass house to the side, and half the universe gone.

"I'm so sorry," Steve says, voice almost inaudible, and Tony shakes his head, because he doesn't have any energy for this — for grudges, for anger, for feeling betrayed by his man, he can't anymore, not after Peter died in his arms, begging him not to go; not after returning home and finding out Pepper isn't here.

"It doesn't matter now," he says, his voice breaking, but he forges on, getting a hold of himself, because this is not the time to fall apart. At least not yet, "Who—" he starts, and a new wave of despair overtakes him. He takes a second to compose himself, gets up and offers Rogers a hand up too, looking behind them to do a head count, "Who made it back?" he asks because it's easier than asking who is gone.

"Thor, Nat," Steve starts, motions behind them towards the raccoon, "Bruce, Rocket, me," he stops talking, and Tony waits — for more names, for some other string of people to come out of the compound, but all he sees are them, the ones Steve tells him.

There's no one else.

He knew Vision had to have died for Thanos to be able to get all the stones, but the rest of them, all gone?

He stares at Steve, who looks back at him, and now Tony sees, he recognizes what seems so broken about this man now — Bucky didn't make it. Sam didn't make it. Steve's just lost his best friends all over again, after fighting so long and so hard to get one of them back.

They start making their way inside, quiet, all of them. Nebula is close, right at his back, and with her, the talking raccoon, whose name is apparently Rocket, and Steve and Rhodey on either side of him as they enter, and he looks around, where everything is where it should be. All the things he put into this place because he thought he was making them a place to *live*, a home for heroes, for the ones who had to leave their lives behind to fight for the common people. End tables and couches and TVs, frivolous, stupid things he placed in this building thinking it would make it all a bit easier for them all.

The things remain, and all the people are gone, all over again.

He used to be in less pain when he cared more about things, and less about people.

Tony Stark stares around the room filled with the people who remained behind, and he doesn't feel up to the task.

"We need rest. All of us. You've fought a war in here, and I've seen another galaxy in the past few days. Half the universe is gone, and the things we'll have to do from now on won't be easy, but we need to rest. We need food, and sleep, and then we need to... talk."

"You know something we don't," Bruce says, eyes scared even though in any other man they may have been hopeful, but this is Bruce: he always expect the worst, because that is what usually comes to him.

"Not quite, but we do need rest."

No one argues with that — he doesn't know where they've been, he doesn't know for sure that they'll follow him, but he's tired. Tired as he hasn't felt in all his life, exhausted from everything, even exhausted from his own feelings.

He steps into his room, feels Rhodey close by, watching him with scared eyes, as if he'll vanish into ash too if he looks away, and he knows that this, this right here, is where his pain will start all over again — but not now. Not tonight.

He trusts Rocket or Steve or Rhodey will find Nebula a place to stay, and he hopes they follow his advice and rest. Tomorrow, another impossible task will begin for them, and he can't have his people running ragged from the start.

When he gets out of the shower, his eyes track all the things Pepper left behind, and he cannot deal with it right then — he just doesn't have the energy for it. He lies down in bed, eyes closed tight against the things he can see in the room, and takes a shuddering breath, pretending he can't still smell the ashes on him even after washing it all out.

He rests.

The universe will hold one more night — there's only half of it left anyway.

X

Being to another galaxy screws with his perception of time, and he has no idea how late it is when he wakes up — he's alone in bed, and that thought breaks him apart again.

He gets up and changes into some clothes for the day, thinking back on the days before their split, when this compound was full of people, and training, and easy camaraderie like he had never had before. When Tony comes to the living room, most of them are already there, few as they are now. Nebula is huddled in a corner, watching everyone and making everyone but Rocket nervous. The raccoon looks trapped between angry and sad, a sentiment Tony definitely understands and relates, but everyone else just looks jittery.

He goes into the kitchen, a gesture that brings him a *déjà vu* of the beginning of their end, but he gets himself some coffee and some food, even though he doesn't feel like he can eat.

"Can you guys tell me what happened here?" he asks when he takes a seat, and slowly, in bits and pieces, Steve, Thor and Natasha tell him of what they did, their plan, and how Thanos won anyway, vanishing into thin air after eliminating half the universe. They tell him of Wakanda's losses, and how T'Challa is gone, and how Shuri and Okoye are the ones trying to hold their people together, along with M'Baku. How they got back to the compound on the off chance that someone, anyone, of them might come back, but no one had, until him.

"What happened to Strange?" Bruce asks him, knowing him well enough not to ask after Peter, not now, possibly never, "He was so serious about keeping the stone safe, did Thanos —" he doesn't finish, but the question is clear: did Thanos kill him to get to the stone?

"He gave the stone up so Thanos would spare my life," he starts, and sees surprise clear on Bruce's face, the one out of them who had actually had any contact with the man, and Tony gets it — it seems insane that Strange would trade half the universe for a single life, "Then Thanos pulled his vanishing trick and left us behind. That's when..." he pauses, thinks about not saying anything, but he feels as if he *owes* the others this. He owes it to them to at least mention their names, to talk about them again, to lift this taboo over the ones who were taken, "After that, they started to vanish. Ash in the wind, this quiet around us as it happened. Drax and Mantis and Quill first, and then Strange, and Peter last," he says, choking up a little, but holding it in, "And, to tell you the truth, that's where things got weird."

"What do you mean?" Natasha asks, and Tony tilts his head to the side before starting, because he's not really sure about what most of this means, but he *knows* this is how they defeat Thanos.

This is how they get their people back.

"We fought Thanos wrong," he begins, and senses the shift in the air at the reminder of their defeat, "We lost, because we went up against a villain, and Thanos... He's not a villain," he shakes his head as they start to protest, anger clear on their faces, "Not conventionally. He didn't want to kill for pleasure, he didn't seek power for himself, he wasn't out for revenge. He's not Ultron, or Red Skull, or even Loki. We lost because, deep down, we could always count on a villain's will to save themselves first. To do that last thing, that last run, to save their own skin before actually accomplishing their goals, because it was a cause *for* them, it

wasn't above their own survival. That was our mistake. We got used to that, we've always won because at the last moment, every one of them, they always came first, it was always about saving their own skin, it was all that mattered."

"Loki wasn't like that. Not in the end," Thor says then, voice betraying anger coming from sadness, and Tony turns to him, conceding the point.

"And where is he now?"

"Dead," the god's voice is hollow, almost daring Tony to contradict him, but Tony understands this now. At least this small part, he gets.

"Because he accepted, at the end, that there are some things bigger than his life. That some things, some people, some causes, are worth dying for. He accepted the consequences of trying to defend what he thought was right, and I bet he *knew* he could die for it, but he tried anyway. He knew he had to do what was right, no matter the cost — and that, all of that, is us. It's why we fight, it's why we keep going even when we shouldn't," he pauses then, sees they are all staring at him, and lets out a deep breath, "That," he begins, "is also Thanos. He's not a villain, not in the way he sees it. He's a hero, saving the universe from collapse, killing without caring who you are, or how much money or influence you have, kings and hobos and children and adults, without discrimination. The way he sees it, he's a savior, and he fights for what he believes in — it's not for *him*. It's for the *cause* he believes, and that's why we lost. Because we saw him for the threat instead of his motivation, and that was our mistake. We have to learn from that."

"What for?" Rocket asks, his furry face contorted in anger, "What's the point in learning about him *now*? He won, you morons, HE WON!" he yells, paws closed into fists by his side, and Tony nods at him tersely.

"Before we landed on Titan, Strange told me he wouldn't hesitate in letting me or the kid die if it meant saving the stone, because he wouldn't put the universe at risk to save a single life — and then he traded it for mine. I *asked him not to*, and he did it anyway."

"Yeah, but what kind of asshole wouldn't save someone's life if they could?" Rocket interjects again, his voice still angry, but Tony keeps shaking his head.

"The kind of guy who understood that some causes are above some lives. I didn't mean anything to Strange — he wasn't my brother, hell, he wasn't even my friend. We met the day we left Earth. He wouldn't risk the fate of *half the universe* to save me. I'm not worth that."

He stops, looking down, because he can't bear to look at any of them right now.

"While we were on that planet, he looked into the future, and he saw fourteen million six hundred and five possible outcomes, and we only won *once*," he pauses, dares to raise his eyes and look at the others carefully, "He knew which future held our victory, and Strange wouldn't consider half the universe dying a *victory* by any means, even if we *did* kill Thanos after that. He knew this was the one path that would mean we'd win, and he knew we could do it, because he *saw* it. All we have to do is figure out how."

And right then he sees in each of his companions' eyes the same dread he's been feeling ever since he understood the meaning of what lay on their shoulders now — half the universe was already gone, and it's on them to bring it back.

“When Strange vanished, he told me we were on the end game. Before he turned to ash, he told me it was the only way — he had to save... *me*, for some reason, and Strange wouldn't do that if he wasn't absolutely sure that I—” he stops, takes a deep breath, anger and betrayal and the fear of having his back stabbed again washing over him, “— that *we* could do it. In any possible scenario, any one of us could have been the ones to go, any one of the others could have been the ones to remain behind, but Strange accepted he would turn to ash to give us a chance to win, and if he did think we could win, then he *knew* there was a way to bring them back.”

Silence meets his statement, and he knows they are wary of it all. He doesn't really *need* them, he thinks — it won't come to a fight, it won't come to a war — it's not about fire power right now, it's about him knowing that if *he* is the key, then he is well aware of what kind of lock will be waiting for him.

He can't really trust them to have his back, he knows. He hurt them, and they hurt him, and they don't have the time to fix that before he gets started, because the plan — and he woke up that morning *knowing* he has a plan — can't wait.

“Do any of you have any idea what Thanos could be up to now?” he asks, and Nebula is the one to answer him.

“He's always said that when his mission was done, he would be able to rest. He accomplished his mission, it will take him some time before he moves on to something else.”

Tony nods at that slowly.

“What of the gauntlet and the stones? What happened to it?”

“They were still with him, but the gauntlet...” Thor trails off, straightening his eyes at Tony, “Do you have a plan already? Do you know what we have to do?”

“I may have an idea, and I don't particularly like it, but I'll need to confer with Princess Shuri and Helen Cho first. If—” he starts but holds back, looking around the room, suddenly finding that he doesn't actually trust any of his old team mates to actually grant him his request.

“What do you need done?” Nebula asks, efficient and cold and ready to get dismembered because she knows she can, quite literally, put herself back together if she needs to, more machine than person.

Well, he always did get along better with machines than people, didn't he?

“I need to find Thanos. We need to find the stones. Leave the rest up to me.”

“Tony—” Steve starts, but Tony turns to look at him, something in his eyes giving the Captain the warning to stop.

“I know you don’t trust me,” he says, voice burning in his throat, “I know you have your reasons not to, but I know what I have to do,” he tells the other man with as much dignity as he can, before turning back to Nebula, “Can you do that?”

“We’ll do it,” it’s Thor who answers, already on his feet by Nebula, a storm in his eyes again.

“Thank you,” he tells them, voice halting, “I’m going to go call Helen and Shuri. I’ll let you know when I have news.”

He leaves the room at that, and doesn’t look back. No point in telling them what his plan is, anyway.

He just needs to get his job done.

X

Not for the first time since he woke up in this century, Steve wishes he had a dictionary to help him put his thoughts into words Tony would understand. And maybe one where he could understand Tony, and something that would make them not explode along the way.

He trusts Tony — his problem is that he is also *careful* with Tony, not because he thinks he won’t come through, but because Steve knows he’ll die trying to do it anyway, even if it’s impossible, even if there seems to be no way he could win. If he promises anyone anything, he’ll kill himself to make it happen, and that’s why Steve is careful.

He already hurt Tony so much, so very, very much, he cannot allow this to be one more thing to pile on him. He can’t bring himself to deposit the weight of *half the universe* on Tony’s shoulders and expect the man to just deal with it, because it’s not *fair*.

“Wouldn’t it be nice,” Natasha starts from the door to his room, careful and measured as always, “If somewhere else in the universe, someone else was planning to bring everyone back and win this war, and none of us had to rip each other apart again?”

He chuckles humorlessly, running a hand over his face with a tired sigh.

“Wouldn’t that be something?”

She takes a seat by his side, quiet for a few moments — they’ve done this quite a few times in the past two years, ever since Steve and Tony broke everyone apart. She comes and makes him talk, and listens and advises, and he lets her know she’s trusted and valued, and her own person, and it works.

It’s sad, but it works.

He misses Tony something fierce, but he has to go through this without him again, apparently, because he broke Tony’s trust so completely that the man doesn’t even let himself think that whatever Steve’s hesitation is, it isn’t about whether or not Tony *can* accomplish

whatever he is planning, but fear that he may not come back from it — be it because he succeeds, or because he fails.

“Strange gave him a plan, or the idea of one, and he knows he can get it done, Steve. He wouldn’t have come back if he didn’t.”

“I know that,” he answers, staring straight ahead, “I don’t doubt that he can get it done, but what if he—”

“That’s not for you to decide,” she tells him simply, to the point and with no accusation in her voice, “It’s his decision to get this done, because, whether we think it’s fair or not, whatever Strange saw that made him save Tony: that’s for him to deal with, and we can’t take his choice way.” She hesitates, something she doesn’t do frequently, and sets a hand on his arm, “You tried deciding things for him before, and it felt like betrayal,” he turns to her sharply, but doesn’t say the ugly words that are at the tip of his tongue when he sees how terrified she seems to be. Just as terrified as him, “Let’s try supporting him this time. Let’s believe in what he can do, and that he can handle it, and hope it gives us better results.”

“It doesn’t feel like that’s enough,” he whispers, looking ahead again, avoiding her knowing gaze, “It doesn’t feel like it’ll fix... us,” he confesses, and Natasha squeezes his shoulder once before getting up, not saying anything.

Maybe she doesn’t think they can fix themselves either.

X

“Let me get this right,” Princess Shuri starts, her face serious, and Tony wants to beat himself for dragging another child into this mess, but he can’t help this one: if he wants this whole insane plane to work, he’ll need her help more than anyone’s, with the possible exception of Helen Cho, “You want me to use vibranium to reconstruct something with the same properties as the gauntlet Thanos used to kill half the universe?”

Her doubt is clear — it’s not so much about whether she can do it or not, with or without his help. It isn’t even about him being able to achieve this: she is suspicious of *him* having it, of *him* using it, because she doesn’t trust him with much, let alone with this.

Shuri had, after all, had contact with Barnes and Rogers and Wanda and all the others, and he bets every cent to his name that they didn’t paint a pretty picture. She doesn’t trust him, but Tony needs her help — he needs the materials she can provide, and he needs her genius to make this work.

So he looks at the screen, and he looks down at the sketches and designs he has already started, and at the corner of his eye he can see the small piece of red polymer, flame-retardant and filled with nanotech, which was going to be a part of Peter’s new suit.

“Have you ever heard of Peter Parker?” he asks her, looking down, not having to be staring at the screen to see her confused look.

“No...” she says, trailing off as if questioning his sanity.

“You wouldn’t have. He’s your age,” he begins, throat closing for a second, but he swallows dryly and goes on, because he has to go on, “Brightest kid I’ve seen since... well, since *I* was a kid. Good kid too, kind hearted, and compassionate—” he stops, tilts his head to the side, looks again at the polymer sitting on his work station, “He was at the scene when the first of Thanos’s watchdogs came to get Strange. He tried to help, but that fight... That fight was way too big for a spider that small. I told him to go home, I told him to leave, I actually *made* him leave, but he came back. Stowed away inside that ship, and he did help in the end, saved Strange, helped with the Guardians when they thought we were on the wrong side, helped with Thanos when he showed up, and he survived the fight, you know?” he finally looks up, and he knows his voice has taken that manic quality it sometimes does when he doesn’t want to go where he is going, but knows he must. Shuri stares at him with tears in her eyes, and it burns him to his very soul, because she and Peter would have gotten along like a house on fire — kind and good and brave, the lot of them, “The worst of it is that he did get away with going to space, to a strange galaxy in an alien ship to fight a mad prune, and it didn’t matter,” he shrugs, looking down again, “It didn’t matter because if he had stayed here, on Earth, we might have lost Strange a little sooner, and maybe we would have lost even more badly on Titan, but... It didn’t matter. Turned to dust, begging me not to go, saying he was sorry, only god knows what for, vanished in my arms, and I couldn’t keep him—” his voice falters, and he closes his eyes again, tightly, feeling this burn inside of him, “—I couldn’t keep him safe from anything.”

Shuri doesn’t say a word, tears streaming down her face too, because Tony knows she feels it as well — her brother is gone, and so many of her people along with him. Because of a being that didn’t understand that killing half of the universe for the good of the other half means there is no good at all.

“So, I’m going to use that to bring them back, because a magician may as well have told me it was the only way. I’m going to use that to undo what Thanos did, and when I’m done, it’s going to fall to pieces, just like his did.”

Shuri takes a second to answer, and doesn’t comment on his tears, just like he doesn’t comment on hers.

“Well, Mr Stark,” she starts, voice rough, but an almost teasing tone in it, “I want to believe that if two geniuses like ourselves will be working on it, it’ll resist better than that.”

Tony never thought he could be so grateful in his life.

As they arrange to have Tony and the rest of them to go to Wakanda, Tony doesn’t notice Steve Rogers sneaking out of the room, and back upstairs, even more upset than before.

Tony doesn’t have the time to deal with Steve now — he has half the universe to save.

Hopefully, he’ll trust better people to have his back this time.

X

Helen stares at him for a very long time before making any kind of move, and Tony can almost feel her disapproval for this as a third person in the room — the only thing keeping

her from saying no to his request is the fact that she knows this is very likely the only way.

He takes a second to be grateful for the fact that she didn't vanish as well — he does know that her girlfriend did, though, and maybe that is a bit of incentive for this insane request of his, more than anything else.

Saving half the universe gets *personal*. More than before, more than ever before.

"I don't like this," she starts, her voice cutting, but firm, "I'm all for experimentation and innovation, but this, the roots of it..." she trails off, and Tony nods, agreeing. He had, after all, seen first hand what that could do to someone, but he knows he has it right this time — he just needs her to make it work, to make it perfect, because there's no room for error here.

Half the universe is at stake. Things need to move fast, because every second they waste here, is a second longer where half the universe is *gone*.

"It's fixed. You know it's fixed. You were on the team that took this stuff out of Pepper, and you know you could make it work. I—" he starts, frustration getting in his way, because Helen Cho is a professional above anything else, and she shouldn't be this reluctant. Not with this, "There is *no way* I can handle whatever those stones do the way I am now. And there is *no one* with the power to do it, apart from the guy who already did it. I'm not asking this because I think it's a great idea, I'm asking because it's the *only one* we have."

"The only one *you* have, you mean," Helen shots back, and Tony sighs, throwing himself against the back of his chair, arms wide open, his lack of sleep and his anxiety finally getting the best of him in this conversation.

"If you have anything else, please, go ahead."

She sighs, annoyance clear in her gesture, and stares at the screen some more — every single file he has on Extremis is in there, and she scans it all once more, before looking back up at him.

"What if—" she hesitates, and he waits, impatient for her answer, already thinking of a list of other doctors who might work with him on this, and would be trustworthy enough not to think that using Extremis on people is a good idea after this is done — it's a very short list, "What if it's not enough?"

His shoulders sag at that, and he breathes in and out deeply before answering, because it always catches him off guard, this kind of thing, this clear demonstration that someone outside of Pepper, and Rhodey, and Happy actually cares about whether he lives or dies.

"Then I'll die trying."

"Tony..."

"Helen, I'm not even supposed to be here," he tells her simply, voice devoid of anything but factual answers, "I was supposed to have died on that planet, and Strange gave me a little bit of time to get this right. If I die trying, then I know that, at least, I'm still following the path

that we were supposed to take to make this work,” he looks at her, then, eyes serious, and voice firm, knowing he can’t falter in this — if a single person he needs to accomplish this thinks he is wavering, they’ll start to question this whole thing, and then they’re done, “I don’t care about what comes after, I just *have* to get this done. And I need you to help me. Please.”

She shakes her head slightly, but sighs, and then nods at him.

“If we are to get this done quickly, I’m going to need more help than just this,” she gestures to the screen, and Tony nods at her, getting up.

“I’ll call in reinforcements,” he jokes weakly, already turning his back to leave.

“Tony,” she calls, and he stops, turning to look at her, “Promise me this is not a suicide mission. Promise me that you are *actually* trying to survive this.”

He swallows dryly at that, but puts on his best press smile.

“I’m doing my best, Helen. I promise.”

He’s just quite sure that his best won’t be good enough.

X

Bruce is not okay.

It’s not like this is a new situation for him — he’s not okay most of the time, really. His childhood was a nightmare, and then the whole thing with the Hulk was another nightmare, and then, when he thought he had found something to help him along, fucking Ultron happened, and he became a gladiator in another galaxy and just— he knows from *not okay*, right?

But this... This is more than that. This is so much more than that.

There’s a pattern for the shitty things that happen to his life, and it is one that he has learned to deal with — he has anger issues, and trust issues, and he knows how to work around those enough to resemble a normal human, most of the time, but right now... Right now he doesn’t have the Hulk, and for something that he had feared, and loathed, and despised in himself for so long, he misses him.

He knows he’s smart, he knows he’s a genius, but right now, Hulk could do things that he can’t — and as he watches Thor and Nebula get ready to hunt Thanos in Wakanda, he wishes he could trust the Other Guy to show up and help them out. Thor can take care of himself, he knows this much, but Nebula look so fragile, so small, and there’s nothing he can do to help them.

“Banner.”

He looks back from where he was staring out the window, and sees Thor coming to him, a worried look in his eyes. He nods at the man, and turns back around to the glass —

everything is quiet outside.

Everything has been quiet for days now, as if the Earth has been hushed — as if the Universe has been muted.

“Are you all right?”

As always, the tone of his voice is rough and doubtful, as it is every time he shows concern, as if he doesn’t think he’s allowed.

Bruce almost snorts at the absurdity of it — personally, he doesn’t think anyone has lost as much as Thor has. His mother, his girlfriend, his father, his hammer, his planet, his people, his friends, his brother, all gone. And here he is, trying to know if Bruce is okay.

“Given the circumstances...” he trails off with a shrug, turning to look at Thor’s profile and quickly looking away, “Be careful out there.”

Thor nods, crossing his arms, a determined look on his face.

“I’m going for the head this time,” he replies, and Bruce does snort then — Thor’s culture is different than theirs, he has to remember, and a part of him who is vaguely aware of his time as the Hulk on Sakaar understands that as well. You fight — and if you lose, you get up and fight again, until you win or you can’t get up anymore.

Life is that simple.

He almost misses it.

“I wish to make a request,” Thor says slowly, and Bruce makes a noise for him to continue, “Keep an eye on Stark.”

It startles Bruce a bit, and he looks at Thor sharply, ready to defend Tony if he has to — he still isn’t clear on what happened after he left, he doesn’t really understand what broke them all up, but he does know that Tony is in pieces because of it, and even if he has the highest regard for Thor, he won’t let the other man put Tony down like this.

Thor takes one look at him and snorts, almost like he can see the indignation rising within him.

“Not for *him*, but *for* him. I feel Stark has maybe reached the end of his rope, as you midgardians say. He is not seeing clearly, he’s lost perspective, and that is a bad way to go into battle.”

Bruce turns around, arms crossed in front of him, and a suspicious frown on his face.

“You do that all the time.”

Thor nods in acquiescence.

“I know. But I’m also the God of Thunder, and Stark, as much as he believes it, as much as we almost believe it too, sometimes, is just a human. He can’t come back from things that I can. He’s young, Banner, as are you, and all the others, and I don’t think he’s thinking right about this.”

“You don’t think he can do it?” Bruce questions, fear gripping at his heart again, but Thor shakes his head.

“I haven’t met this sorcerer he speaks of, but I do know of the stone he carried, and if he says that Stark is the key, then he is doing exactly what should be done to get everyone back, to undo the terrible things Thanos has done. But... I believe also,” he starts carefully, “that our friend Tony has given up hope on saving himself too. He accepted this truth of fixing Thanos’s misgivings at the cost of his life, and that is not the way to accomplish such a task. If he goes into this scheme of his believing he won’t have a way out, then he won’t even look for one, even if it’s possible.”

Bruce thinks back on the past few days, and he sees it with a clarity he hadn’t before — Tony isn’t eating or sleeping much, if at all. Locked in his workshop the whole time, waiting for the all clear so they can head to Wakanda to start the actual work on the replacement gauntlet, meeting with Helen Cho about something he hasn’t told them yet, always just an excuse away from hiding from his old team, conferring with Shuri and Rocket at all hours, eating only when Nebula has glared at him enough to make him feel bad about it, worried and working all the time.

“I’ll do my best,” he tells Thor, who nods at him firmly.

“The Princess Shuri told Stark we’d be getting the clearance to head there later today, and then I and Nebula will start to track Thanos’ trail, to find him. We’ll bring him to justice, and, hopefully, be a little closer to the end of this.”

Bruce feels like Thor wants to say more, but right then Tony shows up, a strained smile on his face as he approaches the two of them.

“Hey, Banner, I’ve been looking for you. You got a minute?”

“Sure,” he replies, patting Thor on the shoulder as he follows Tony out the room and to his workshop, “Are you finally going to tell me why you’ve been meeting with Helen Cho?” he teases, and Tony smiles at him minutely as he puts in the access codes to the door.

“Yes, actually.”

Bruce is honestly surprised by this.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Helen thinks... Look, here’s the thing, if you feel uncomfortable with it, or if you don’t want to help out with this, no one is going to blame you, but we do need you to say that right off the bat, because we may need to find more people then, and that’s not going to be easy, but I don’t want you to feel like you have no other choice—”

“But you kind of don’t have another choice,” comes Helen’s voice from across the lab, and Bruce blinks at it — he didn’t know Helen was at the compound.

“Helen—”

“Tony, we’ve been through this. Bruce is brilliant, and with him helping out, we can actually get this done. You have your part to play, now let other people do theirs.”

Bruce reigns in a scoff at that, because asking Tony to delegate is like asking a fish not to swim, but, strangely enough, the man only swallows, and turns to Bruce, his expression serious.

“You are aware of the plan I and Shuri have going on, right?”

“Replace the gauntlet, get the stones, and undo what Thanos did?” he says, which sounds way too simple to work, but isn’t that the answer sometimes? Something so ridiculously simple that no one else has thought of it before?

Tony nods, bouncing at the balls of his feet, a nervous tick Bruce had always thought of as childish and energetic, but now feels like Tony is trying to flee.

“That’s the gist of it, yeah. Rocket has been a huge help with it, actually. Nebula told me he’s quite good at engineering, which is *not* a sentence I ever thought I’d say, but, you know. I’ve got backup for that part.”

“And there’s another part to the plan, which you haven’t informed us of yet?” Bruce guesses, and Tony gives him a small smile.

“Got it in one, Jolly Roger,” he says, and then sobers up again, sighing, “There’s no way a human can handle the power of the stones, gauntlet or no gauntlet. The... dwarf that made that thing made it specifically for Thanos, and there’s no way a human could handle that much power, not with what we have available now. Shuri is helping, of course, because vibranium has a better chance at this than any of our common metals and alloys, but...”

“It’s not enough.”

“It’s not enough,” Tony repeats, nodding along.

“So...” he trails off, because if Helen is saying they need *help*, it’s because there’s something they think they can *do*.

“Do you remember when I told you about the Mandarin?” Bruce nods, intrigued and worried already, and he doesn’t even know their plan yet, “Remember anything about Extremis?”

“Tony—” he starts, a warning in his tone.

“It’s stabilized, Bruce. If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t even bring this up. I balanced that stuff out so we could get it out of Pepper, and then we, I and Helen, we buried that shit deep, because—well, just because something is *stable*, it doesn’t mean it’s *safe*.”

“I’m glad we agree on that, at least,” Helen mutters, and Bruce looks at her for a second, seeing that she’s not exactly thrilled with this plan of theirs.

“So you plan on... what? Injecting yourself with Extremis, and then hope for the best?”

“No. I plan for the both of you to inject me with Extremis, and have it work on healing me long enough to do what needs to be done, and then get that gauntlet off of me, so I can heal. And then the two of you are going to get Extremis *out* of me, like we did with Pepper.”

“This does not sound... safe. At all.”

“The margin of risk we’re taking is high,” Helen tells him, and Bruce can tell she’s frazzled already, “But there’s a chance we’ll succeed. As Tony said, it *is* stable now, at the stage we can get it to work, but we’ll need to accelerate its working rate as much as possible, and still keep it stable enough that Tony won’t implode when it’s activated — Extremis, the way we managed to stabilize it, doesn’t start acting until it has something to *react* to. Unless he’s injured *after* implantation, it won’t activate, and I only plan on him getting injured when he has the gauntlet and has made it work enough to...” she waves her hand about, and Bruce gets it — it’s hard for science people to trust things like magical jewelry and warlocks predicting the future by looking at it, “Get whatever done.”

“Would be a festive way to go, though — explode and take Thanos with me,” the man says, a forced grin on his face, “Your goal is to try and make this insane part of it work, while I, Shuri and Rocket get the gauntlet done, and Nebula and Thor hunt the purple menace down and get the jewels to power it up.”

Bruce needs a minute to even begin to contemplate an answer to that — he notices that Tony trusts *him*, three aliens and a doctor, along with a 16 year old girl, but he hasn’t brought in any of his old teammates into his plan.

The other two people in the room seem to know he needs this time to process, but he starts shaking his head.

“The amount of things that could go wrong—” he begins, but Tony is already shrugging it off.

“All of them accounted for as much as we can. This is the plan, this is what we have to get done, and there’s no room to doubt this — it is going to happen. Now, are you going to help us, or should I start making the calls to shady characters who may be able to help out about half as much as you can, and thus, making this even *more* difficult than it already is?” Tony steamrolls, and Bruce sees then that Thor isn’t *quite* right — he needs to keep an eye on Tony, but he also has to help, because he sees now something that the others probably don’t particularly *want* to see, because, so far, they have always come back in mostly one piece: this may be the time that Tony *has* to sacrifice himself to get this done.

And Bruce loves him enough, and knows him enough, to actually help him get there.

“Alright,” he breathes deeply, cleaning his glasses as he’s at it, “Show me what you have so far.”

He hopes this will be worth it.

X

They leave for Wakanda at nightfall. The quinjet, beauty that it is, holds them and their equipment, and won't raise any flags, mostly because no government is stable enough to give a shit about what they do. If they told them all they were going to have a dance off with Thanos, they'd just take their word for it and let them go — any chance that anything can be fixed, and they're taking it.

Shuri had sent them the correct approach coordinates, and FRIDAY is flying the jet with no issues, giving Tony space enough to check that everything they need actually came with them. He sees Thor and Nebula to a corner, strategizing, most likely, and he sees Natasha watching Bruce and Helen talking, at the back. Rogers, he knows, is watching him, but he's ignoring it, because that's what he does, and so he looks for a quiet corner, and pulls up the schematics he has almost completed — or as much as he could accomplish without having broader knowledge about vibranium itself. They'll have to rework some things after Shuri sees it, but he's confident that the thing will serve its purpose.

"Mind if I take a look?" asks a rough, small voice to his side, and he looks down to see Rocket at his side.

Tony nods, and the two of them immerse themselves into the works, continuously surprising Tony at how good the raccoon actually is with tech.

"You know..." Rocket starts after they've been at it for a while, almost alone now, only Thor's voice can be heard around them, the others probably resting before the storm really hits. There is a knowing tone in his voice, and Tony has to give it to whatever or whoever created this creature — he considers Rocket as much of a person as anyone else right now, they did a wonderful job, "Once, Quill had to actually hold one of these," he keeps going, nodding towards the six stones in holograms around them, and Tony keeps quiet, because he thinks he knows where this is going, "Just the one. It took all of us, me, and Gamora, and Quill, and Drax, holding hands to spread its power out, so he wouldn't disintegrate," he finishes flatly, making Tony look at him, "All four of us. And Quill's father was an actual *planet*."

Tony considers lying. He thinks about deflecting, or making up an excuse, but in the end he just shrugs.

"The gauntlet will take care of the power in it. Extremis will make sure I'm alright to do what needs to be done."

Rocket's eyes stay on him for a while, and he knows the raccoon realized he didn't say a word about surviving.

In the end, the other male sighs, and keeps his commentary to the engineering bits, and Tony hears it for what it is — Rogers may not be willing to trade lives, but Rocket knows, just as Tony does, that *one* life doesn't count against half the universe.

It doesn't count at all.

X

Shuri welcomes them with a wane smile and clear trepidation in her eyes — Tony is again reminded that this is a kid who's been left with a whole country to rule, and now has to help them too.

It's just not fair.

They immerse themselves in their project — Shuri, Tony, and Rocket — and eventually, by the end of the second day, Shuri feels he and Rocket have enough knowledge about vibranium that she can leave them to finish the gauntlet on their own, and then she goes over Helen and Bruce's corner of the lab, and helps them out with Extremis too.

When she comes over, by the next day, she knows what his plan is, she knows he doesn't count on coming back, and she smiles sadly at him when she says that Extremis is as stable as they can possibly make it, at the highest healing rate they could accomplish in a timely manner.

"Thor and Nebula think they have a lead too," she tells him, eyes on the designs he's showing her, trying to find something they might have missed, "They sent word to Okoye that we should be ready to move in two days, at the most. We can start getting this done tonight, finish this up tomorrow, and get to the procedure the day after that."

He nods, taking a deep breath.

He hasn't been able to rest since he went to Titan. When he closes his eyes, all he sees is Peter clinging to him, and Strange calling him Tony in a broken tone.

Maybe when this all gets done he'll be finally able to rest.

She looks like she wants to tell him something else, and Tony waits, hoping she doesn't try to talk him out of it — he doesn't want to be responsible for breaking the heart of a sixteen year old brilliant girl. Instead of talking, she darts forward quickly, and envelops him in a hug for a few seconds, before stepping back, tears in her eyes, and, if he is honest to himself, in his too.

"You'll get it done," she tells him, her voice brooking no arguments.

He nods, and she smiles at him one last time before leaving.

Rocket looks at him quietly, but they don't talk about it — just set out to start production on the gauntlet.

He will get it done.

X

There are very few things in life that Tony wants *less* than a conversation with Steve Rogers. He is actually willing to *die* more than he is willing to talk to that man, mostly because he doesn't have the energy, or the will, to put himself through this when he has so much to do and so little time left to get it done.

It doesn't mean he manages to escape it, though, not by a long shot. The compound was big, and it was *his*, which meant he knew all the good escape spots, but the labs he has to work with in Wakanda are smaller, and he's limited to certain areas of the palace, because, let's face it, it is a palace, and they can't very well give him free reign of it.

It's late at night, and Tony is just making sure everything is set so he can go into the procedure of injecting Extremis with as much confidence as he can — the gauntlet is ready, just a big metal glove, really, spaces for the stones in it, with the black and golden wakandan patterns all over it, forming intricate designs that Shuri didn't have the time to explain, but assured them would make everything come together to contain the power of the stones.

Shuri is off dealing with matters of her own country, and Rocket's gone to talk to Nebula, so they can finish their hunt for Thanos in the next few days.

They are on the end game now.

So when he sees Rogers staring at him through the glass, he sighs, runs a hand over his face, and tries to get a grip on himself so he can deal with this, probably for the last time.

He sees Rogers startle as the doors open to let him in, and the man takes a couple of steps cautiously, seemingly waiting for Tony to acknowledge him before talking.

"What is it, Cap?" he asks, voice tired as he closes the last few schematics and thinks about a shower, food and some sleep. He can't be sleep deprived when he goes in for it, now can he?

"I know I mostly have no right to tell you this, but I'm worried about you," the other man starts, and Tony sighs deeply, because it's one of *those* talks.

Two weeks late, actually, when every single person who cares about him at all has already had the same one.

"Okay, got that, anything else?"

"Tony—"

"What do you want, Rogers? You're worried, okay, I get it, I'd be worried too if it were anyone else here, but it isn't. We are all worried, and that sucks, but this is what we're doing, and this is what we have to get done to get everyone back."

"I was talking to Bruce, and he seems to think that there's a chance you might not make it."

Tony turns then, stares at Steve with a frown on his face.

"And?" he prods, because by now, everyone knows there's a chance he might not make it. He himself is way more convinced of the fact that he *will not* make it. But it will be worth it.

“We don’t—” he starts, but Tony cuts him off with a bitter laugh.

“—trade lives? Is that what you were going to say?” he asks, and sees Rogers closing his hands into fists by his sides, “Rogers, all we *do* is trade lives. And by the way, when did you last use that sentence, with Vision? And where is *he* now?” he pauses for a few seconds, letting that sink in, “If you and Wanda had allowed him to do what *he* wanted to do, we wouldn’t even be here right now. If the stone had been destroyed, we may have had to battle Thanos, but he wouldn’t have *killed half the universe*.”

Steve takes a step back at the strength of his words, but Tony isn’t done — not by a long shot, because this is *his* choice, and he’ll be damned if he’ll let Rogers mess with this.

“But if you want to make yourself feel better, here you go: I’m living on borrowed time. I was supposed to have died on Titan, and I didn’t. So if by dying I get to bring people back, if by doing this, I get to save everyone, then this is what I’m going to do,” he stops, letting out a deep breath, eyes burning as he stares at Captain America, “How’s that for lying down on the wire?” he asks, voice bitter and almost cruel.

“I thought you’d just cut the wire,” Steve answers, voice thick with emotion, and Tony finally breaks, gaze on the floor, trying very carefully not to break down, not in front of Steve.

“Took me all this time to realize that sometimes that’s not a possibility.”

“Why does it have to be *you*?” Steve asks after a minute, and Tony swallows dryly at that, biting his lip for a second before exhaling sharply.

“Honestly? Two reasons. First, I don’t trust anyone else to actually manage this. I don’t think any of us is equipped to deal with it, but I do know that I can get it done, and not let that amount of power overwhelm me, because after Ultron, and after... everything, I know what happens when you think you have all the power.”

Steve blinks at the honesty of the answer.

“And the other reason?”

Tony takes a deep breath before answering, because it’s something he’s not particularly fond of thinking about, but he knows he has to.

“I’m the most expendable.”

“Tony,” he tries, but Tony holds up a hand, stopping the argument from following.

“Look, Steve, I know this is not how you play, but this is how we *have* to play this. It’s going to happen. You can be bitter about it, or you can try and argue about it, but all you’re doing is making this harder for me, and everyone else.”

“This isn’t fair,” he ends up muttering, and Tony scoffs.

“Do you honestly see any other way?”

He sees Steve looking around the lab, and sits again, tired and worn out from the work and the situation and Steve's presence.

"How's Extremis supposed to work?" the man ends up asking, and Tony arches an eyebrow, and thinks he should have a talk to Bruce about not babbling.

"What do you know about it?"

Steve shrugs.

"I heard Bruce and Helen talking about how that's what's supposed to keep you alive when the power goes through. They didn't seem sure it was a good idea. Is it like the serum?"

Tony shakes his head.

"No. Well, not in all the ways that matter — your serum and Extremis were designed from different ends, to achieve almost the same result, but not quite. This is supposed to heal what is wrong in record time — the first tests were about regrowing limbs, recovering whole parts of someone's body, in a matter of minutes. But it's unstable, mostly. It can be injected in someone, but we don't know how that's going to affect people long term — we can stabilize it to get it out, which is what Pepper had to do when she had this in her system, and it's what I'm going to do if I make it back."

"But you don't think you will," Steve presses on, and Tony sighs again, in defeat. Rogers won't be happy until he breaks Tony down to his smaller particles, will he?

"I'm taking every precaution, and I'm doing everything I can think of, on my end, but, I'm gonna be real here, Rogers: I'm just hoping this shit will hold off long enough for me to undo what Thanos did. I'm told *one* of the stones almost consumed Quill, and his father was some kind of god-planet hybrid. I don't know how Ultron managed to get that stone on the body he was growing, or how Vision dealt with it, but Shuri theorizes the vibranium in there had something to do with it, which is why we're here, and not at home, trying this without putting a sixteen year old at risk again. I'm doing what I can, but I think that with you, at least, I can be honest — it doesn't look good."

"And you're okay with that?" Steve's voice is rough and tired and sad, and Tony doesn't know what to do here — Steve has no right to do this now. To act as if he cares, as if Tony dying won't be a plus down the line somewhere. It's not fair, and Tony wants to punch him for making Tony the unattainable thing of this turn, to turn him into the reason Steve is going to feel bad and guilty, because there's always something.

"Look, bottom line here?" he starts, turning his back on Steve, and looking for something to do, to finish, to get ready, because his procedure is tomorrow, and he doesn't want to leave anything to chance, seeing as he doesn't know how useful he is going to be until his body adapts to Extremis, "I'm betting everyone gets pardoned after bringing half the universe back. You'll have the team again. You'll have Barnes, and Wilson, and Wanda, and everyone else."

"But not you."

“I would think for you that’d be a plus,” he replies cuttingly.

“Tony—” Steve’s voice is absolutely broken, and Tony’s had enough.

“No,” he states simply, turning back around, and walking towards Rogers, fire in his heart because he is *done* with this. Done. “You don’t get to do this. I have people worried about me, and who are doing their damn best to make sure I get back from this in one piece, as much as they can. I have a best friend who’s doing everything he can to make this work, and people at my company who are trying to keep everything together as we do this little feat called bringing half the universe *back*. There are people who care about me, about whether I live or die after a mission, but you are not one of them. And just because there’s a chance I might not come back from this one, this doesn’t give you the right to act like you care at all.”

“I never wanted—”

“You left me in Siberia, Steve, on my own, with no help. You left me, after attacking the thing that until a couple of months earlier was keeping me alive. I made it back, because I always make it back, but it wasn’t because of you — you made your choice to put Barnes above everything, and now you have to deal with that. I don’t care if this hurts you. I don’t care that you don’t want to fucking *trade lives*,” he says the last words mockingly, and Steve flinches from him, “I don’t care. If I do die, if I don’t make it back, believe me, I’ll be hurting, I’ll be dying knowing I caused pain to people who don’t deserve it — but you’re not one of them. You don’t get to pick and choose when I’m your friend and when I’m your enemy. It’s one or the other, and when you left me in a broken armor in Siberia so you could save the guy who murdered my parents, you made your choice very clear.”

There’s silence.

Tony waits, because taking that off his chest helps, but not as much as he had thought it would — it doesn’t bring them back, and it doesn’t heal him miraculously. Maybe, if he actually thought he would have the chance to make it back alive, he would try and patch this up, but he can’t, not now.

Rogers finally looks at him, eyes clear and bright in the artificial light.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Tony answers, a repeat of what they said to each other when he got back from Titan, but he thinks that now Steve finally understands — it’s not the pain that he caused that doesn’t matter now, it’s the fact that he’s sorry. It doesn’t matter, because Tony is done with this, because he has no time left to figure this out, and it doesn’t matter if Steve is sorry or not, they *do not have time enough to fix it*.

It doesn’t matter now.

Rogers nods once, and then he leaves.

Tony rethinks his plan — goes to his room, showers, eats, and tries very hard to fall asleep.

Only a couple more days, and everything will be over.

X

It should come as absolutely no surprise that Tony Stark hates medical procedures with a *passion*.

If he could never get checked out, ever, for anything, for the rest of his life, he would die a happy man — between Afghanistan, the arc reactor, paladium poisoning, Extremis and the surgery after that, he had had enough medical issues to last him a life time, but it wasn't over.

Just one more, he thinks, as he gets ready for this.

He asked people not to be around and, truly, few of them have come by. Rhodey, however, had flown the night before to be with him for it, because his best friend wouldn't allow him to go through this on his own.

He doesn't deserve Rhodey.

They look at each other during prep, and Tony can feel his friend's trepidation — he may have left a few details out of the explanation he had given him before, because he knows Rhodey would try and talk him out of it, and if there's one person who actually *could*, it's him, and Tony can't waver.

He lies down on the medical bed, swallowing dryly, staring at the medical equipment around him, and lets out a weak chuckle.

"God, I hate this," he mutters, and Rhodey clearly sees this as his opportunity.

"Why not let someone else do it, then? Why not give this to someone else to bear? Why does it have to be you?" Rhodey's voice is tired, so tired. It's like he's been supporting the weight of the world on his shoulders and now it's showing, and Tony hates that he's the one doing that to his best friend, but he *has to do this*. He has to.

"He called me Tony," he answers, and Rhodey merely frowns, not seeing how that's an answer to his questions, "Strange, when he saw all those futures — he called me Tony. It took even Rogers *months* to call me that. Even you, it took you weeks of classes with me around so you'd do it. And he called me Tony after seeing the future, and it wasn't just a normal, hey, that's your name, so I'm going for it, it was... It had something behind it," Tony turns to stare at his best friend then, knowing he looks more fragile than he actually is, what with the hospital gown and the IV drip already in for his procedure, "How broken do you think things got, when the odds were different, how much did he see me going through, that with those futures I went from Stark to Tony to a man who didn't even like me, who, only hours before, had told me he would let me and a kid die if he had to?"

Rhodey sighs then, because it's clear there's nothing else he can do.

"Pretty bad," he agrees, and Tony nods at him.

“So, I’m avoiding that. This gets done, and we get everyone back, and then we get this out, and there will be no need for anyone to say my name like that again.”

He knows Rhodey knows him enough not to buy the bald faced lie he just told, to actually believe he’s that optimistic, but his best friend swallows dryly and nods, a hand coming up to grip his shoulder for a moment before hugging him tight.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Tony only smiles as he watches Rhodey go, lying down when Bruce and Helen come into the room with him.

He closes his eyes, letting the anesthesia wash over him, and hopes that, when he wakes up, he’ll be closer to the end than now.

Whatever end that is.

X

When he wakes up, all he feels is... warm.

He’s so warm.

Tony had never noticed how cold he ran until this moment, because his body feels like it has a gentle fire centered on his chest, and it feels *good*, warming him up from the inside out.

He opens his eyes, and realizes that something’s wrong, no matter how good he feels — something is beeping angrily around him, and Helen is talking fast as he puzzles what could have gone wrong already, this is the only plan they have, he can’t let them down before they even *began*, but then the doctor seems to notice his eyes are open and she stops and *stares* — he can almost see her gasp behind her mask.

“Tony, are you with us?” he turns his head slightly, and sees Bruce — behind him, there’s Steve, and Natasha and Rhodey, all of whom look *wrecked*, and on the other side, he can see Shuri, her smart eyes never leaving the data she’s following.

“What happened?” he asks, voice raspy, and finally he feels something other than warmth — he aches, as one does after being put through a very intense workout.

Tony tries to sit up and realizes he doesn’t have a drip anymore, and something in the room smells vaguely of smoke.

Rhodey takes a cautious step forward and hands him a glass with a straw, and he drinks carefully, but gratefully.

At the corner of the room, Shuri sighs in relief.

“All clear,” she tells Cho, and everyone in the room seems to relax at once.

“What happened?” he repeats, and Bruce takes off his glasses, cleaning them on his shirt — a nervous gesture Tony has seen a hundred times these past few days.

“Extremis wasn’t supposed to get activated until you got hurt,” Bruce starts, and Tony nods at him, making Bruce frown, “Thing is, you already *were* hurt. As soon as the procedure for the injection was done, it activated, and we called in reinforcements, because...” he trails off, and Tony nods.

“In case you needed backup, if I woke up raging and trying to kill everyone.”

“Basically, yes,” Helen agrees, and Tony nods at them, looking at Shuri — strangely enough, he trusts her to tell him the truth instead of palliatives right now.

“Did it work? Are we still on for the next part?”

Shuri nodded, but Tony could see something in her eyes — anger, possibly.

“Extremis activated because you had issues in your chest — it wasn’t healed like it should have been. Those weren’t wounds from the surgery we were aware you went through,” she explains, her accent somehow more clipped, and her eyes firmly on the other side of the room — on Steve, Tony realized.

Oh.

This was so not the time for this kind of thing.

“Shuri—” he starts, but she looks at him sharply, a hand raised, and he can see it now: a Princess. This is not a smart girl, or just a scientist, this is a Princess, the ruler of whole country in her brother’s absence, and if she thinks she has the right to be angry about something, she will be, no matter what Tony says.

“When my brother took all of you in, he thought he was doing it because you had been wronged — not that he disagreed with Stark, but because he knew the solution wouldn’t be keeping all of you in prison. He thought he was doing the right thing. I’m almost glad he is not here to see what I saw just now, because anyone who does the kind of damage *you* did to someone you call a *friend* is not worth the dangers my brother put all of us in.”

Tony isn’t brave enough to look at Steve right now, but he does take in a deep breath, and he notices the difference — he’s not in pain.

He can’t remember how long it’s been since he hasn’t been in pain — probably before that ill-fated trip to Afghanistan. Even after the surgery to remove the shrapnel, he had never been the same. Too much intervention, too much space in his chest had been used to keep him alive, and he *knew* he had lost many things back then, but he had never realized the *pain* until right now, when he feels none.

A part of him is relieved, and he can’t think of a moment when he’s been more grateful — if he has to die today, or tomorrow, or a week from now, he’ll live his final moments free from pain, at least *this* pain.

“The damage was already there, Shuri,” he starts, “I didn’t realize it would impact the procedure, because it’s been there for years — ever since I had the shrapnel removed.”

“No, actually,” Helen intervenes, and Tony is grateful that she isn’t directing that anger towards *him*, because he can’t remember a time when he saw Helen this angry, “I was there for that procedure — you weren’t 100%, we *warned* you, you would never be a 100% again, that your chest wouldn’t be the same, and your lung capacity would be reduced, but the damage, the *actual* damage was gone. What we saw now, Tony, what Extremis healed...” she trails off, and Tony finally raises his eyes to look at Steve, and the man looks *broken*.

Because he did that.

Tony knows Steve is aware of that, Tony *knows* Steve feels guilty for it. And now, now that the other man has seen the extension of the damage he’s done, of what that shield into his chest made, Tony feels his own heart ache, because he can’t hold a grudge against that much despair.

“Steve—” he starts, and then he has to cut himself off, because Okoye invades the room.

“They found Thanos — we have to go. Now.”

And that’s when he runs out of time.

X

Thanos is not really holding his own when they arrive — a scramble to get everyone outfitted and ready for combat, another struggle for Tony to find his bearings with no suit, with making peace with the fact that he would have to sit out the fight, that his only defense would be the people around him, and a glove on his hand — Thanos is toying with both Nebula and Thor, and Tony knows, he knows deep in his bones, that they are just stalling for time, for them to get there, to free the stones so Tony can—

Well, so Tony can do what he came here to do.

He doesn’t follow the fight, because that part is not up to him. He knows, from what the others said, that Thor can handle Thanos, but he is surprised to see that, when the time for the final strike to be delivered, the god stands aside, and allows Nebula the choice of doing it.

Thanos is on his knees, a smirk on his face as he faces the creature he seems to have poured most of his cruelty into, and it is only then that Tony dares approach them.

Nebula is ready — her face is contorted in anger, and bitterness and sadness, but Tony knows that she will do it when the time is right. He approaches them trying to look more confident than he feels, and the Titan stares at him, smirk slowly fading away.

“You would have made a fine child of Thanos’,” he tells Tony, who shakes his head, takes a deep breath, and nods at Thor, who grabs the broken gauntlet from Thanos hands, careful not to touch the stones, and *pulls*.

In a second, everything changes — at Thor's touch, the gauntlet falls apart, and the stones scatter on the ground. Tony puts on his own gauntlet, and drops to his knees, to gather them all, heart beating faster and faster every time he moves.

He hears Thanos yelling, he hears Nebula's answering scream of rage, a weapon firing, the sound of a shield flying by, and finally the sound of a body dropping to the floor.

When the last stone is in his hand, when he drops is on the glove, his body is already *burning*, from the inside out, and he doesn't even have the full power yet.

He looks up, terrified, as terrified as he was when he saw space through a wormhole, and he can see his fear reflected back at him in Steve's eyes.

The last stone falls into place, and Tony closes his eyes, ignoring the explosion going on inside of him.

Undo what he did, he thinks, fist closing.

And then there's nothing.

X

For a minute there, Steve forgets to watch the target — he forgets what he and Thor and Nebula and all the others had trained and talked about when it came down to this fight with Thanos, because, staring at Tony, his whole body freezes.

Unprotected, nothing but a thin t-shirt and jeans, that strange glove on one of his hands and trepidation in his eyes, Tony kneels on the ground, collecting the stones that are going to kill him.

Steve is absolutely certain of it.

Thor and Nebula take care of Thanos, and Steve only has to act once, throwing his shield when the Titan tries a last desperate attempt to harm his daughter — the shield knocks him down, Nebula shoots him, and Thor embeds the ax in his skull, and suddenly, it is over.

Again, he feels the quiet around them, and he looks away from Thanos' prone form on the ground to stare at Tony, and he promptly loses his breath.

Tony has the last stone in his hand, staring at Steve with despair in his eyes, so clearly terrified it makes Steve's heart break all over again.

The man drops the last stone on the gauntlet, his fist closing, and Steve can't look away.

He hears a gasp by his side, and sees all the others staring at Tony too — Tony, eyes closed, shining brighter than anything around them, in bright gold, red, yellow and green, bright blue and purple.

Tony isn't moving, but his body is — he is lifted from the ground, as if by a gentle breeze, a haze of golden dust around him, and suddenly, soundlessly, it explodes.

It starts on his left hand, the hand with the gauntlet, and it *spreads*, as rain around them, so bright and so heavy Steve has to shield his eyes.

The same quiet as when everyone disappeared is around them then — a hushed whisper of things coming back, breathed out again into the world by the dust.

“Steve,” he hears the whisper before he sees Bucky, and he feels as if his legs are going to give out, but his friend reaches for him, and he is there, *he is there*, solid and back, and around them, everything is bright and sound has come back into the world.

A green woman is crying in Nebula’s arms as a man in a red leather jacket hugs them, along with a bald, marked man.

Rocket has Groot clutched tight against him, and Okoye’s eyes shine with raw emotion as she pulls her King to her in a desperate embrace. Sam has his arms around Natasha, and Thor is nowhere to be seen for a moment — all of it takes maybe two seconds for Steve to register, and then, in the middle of this relief of victory, of the rush of *we did it*, comes a desperate shout from a voice too young to know this much pain.

“*Mister Stark!*”

There is a teenager kneeling on the grass, his body covered in a suit, and Steve knows him, fought him even — the Spider kid from Berlin, who, he knows, Tony sees as his protégé.

“Come on, mister Stark, wake up. Come on!”

Steve starts walking towards him, and he knows the others are following, because the scene is heartbreaking — Tony has fallen face first into the ground, and the kid has pulled him against his own body, rocking back and forth.

At his side, a man who can only be Strange, by the cloak on his shoulders, is looking down, a grave shadow on his face.

“Why isn’t he waking up?”

Finally the kid looks up at them, and his eyes are full of tears. He turns to Strange first, and then the others, eyes accusing in his immense sadness.

“Why aren’t you doing anything?” he shouts at them, cradling Tony’s body closer to himself, “You have to help him!”

And then, just as Steve is going to say that he doesn’t know if they can help, that he doesn’t think there’s anything to do, Strange is already looking back at Thor, who stands there, a strong, black man on one side of him, Loki on the other.

The three walk over, and Strange follows — Thor stands beside Steve as the rest of them approach the kid.

“Peter, I need you to let go of him now,” Strange starts, his voice cautiously gentle, but the kid seems to want to refuse him.

“Are you going to help him?” he asks, narrowing his eyes at the two strangers.

“We are.”

Steve is surprised when it’s not Strange who answers, but Loki.

Suddenly, the man in the red leather jacket comes forward, and he pulls Peter up, hugging him to his side.

“Hey, kid, it’s going to be okay, all right? They’re going to do the right thing there, come on,” as he talks, he leads Peter to the rest of them.

The black man with strange eyes slowly reaches out, Strange in a battle stance beside him, ready to react, and grasps the gauntlet.

Steve is so distracted by the act itself, he almost misses the wide-eyed look of fear that crosses Loki’s face before he throws out his hands, a shield of what Steve can only assume is magic covering them, and protecting them from the blast that comes not a second later.

On the other side of the shield, bright gold is once again glittering around Tony, and Steve panics, because even the three magicians present don’t seem to know what to make of it.

He is about to ask them what is going on when he sees Tony opening his eyes, which are shining just as golden as the mist around him.

And then the screaming starts.

times

Chapter Summary

Tony isn't dead - he can't quite decide if this is good or bad.

Chapter Notes

Yeeeeeah, I know I said a week, but then it was done, so... hope you guys like it. The comments I got on this were so perfect, and it made me so happy, I couldn't stop writing.

You should expect chapter three in about a week, I think.

Thank you SO MUCH for all the kudos and bookmarks and comments, you guys are awesome <3

If this is being dead, it sucks.

Not that he had expected death to be fun or anything, but it's very... weird.

Unsettling.

He's not in pain, which is more than he can say for the last few memories he has, but he's also not... well.

It's... foreign.

He takes a long deep breath and hears, for the first time, a rush of whispers all around him, which is strange all on its own because he hadn't realized he could hear until that moment.

His eyes open on their own accord, and the world floods in — color and light and shadows all around: he's in a medical facility.

He is in the *Avengers Compound's* medical facility.

He is *alive*.

There's commotion around him, as someone gasps and then the sound of shoes running, and people talking, but he is having a little bit of trouble taking it all in, because, again, he feels weird.

Light.

Turning his head slightly, he sees Bruce coming in, and his friend looks *wrecked*, but also a good kind of wrecked — relieved and happy and— are those tears in Helen's eyes?

For him?

He tries to get up, but fails, so Bruce hurries forward and helps him sit up, and he smiles gratefully at the man, looking around slowly — and bit by bit, all sound and color and questions fade around him again as he catches sight of his own reflection on the mirrored panel facing his bed.

The man looking back is young. He knows he's almost fifty, gray hairs all around and more trouble with keeping up his strength than he'd liked there to be, but the man looking back at him looks ageless, and there's something... otherworldly in him.

Whoever he is, whatever he became, he sure as hell doesn't look like the old Tony Stark anymore.

X

After his — perfectly understandable — freak out, Bruce and Helen check every single thing that could be wrong with him, *and nothing is*. He doesn't think he's ever been this healthy in his *life*, and he is having some trouble comprehending that — he wants answers, needs them like *air*, because he thought he would die, and he clearly got a new lease on life.

"Everyone made it back," Bruce tells him when he's finally done collecting even more of Tony's blood, and he can breathe a little easier now, knowing that it worked.

It worked and he's still alive.

He has no idea how to deal with this situation.

"Peter?" he asks, adding quickly, "Pepper?"

Bruce nods again, smiling in relief.

"Pepper will be by soon — she keeps coming every night, even if just to sit with you. Peter will probably come by tomorrow, he's been really worried," his friend pauses with a weary sigh, "We all are."

Tony stares at him some more, not knowing what to say.

"Come on, Bruce. Give me something here, because this is not..." he trails off, because saying *this is not what I expected* doesn't even begin to cover it.

"I know. Helen's gone to get the others, they'll be able to explain it better than we can."

A couple of minutes later, Helen comes back and they guide him to a room where Thor is waiting with his brother and another man, along with Strange.

Tony feels a bit ganged up here, because everyone is staring at him as if waiting for him to explode, and he really wants to believe that's not an actual possibility.

"Are you guys planning on telling me what's going on, or do I have to start guessing?"

God, even his voice is slightly different. He hasn't sounded like that in years — young and unbothered by too much drinking and drugs.

"Mister Stark," starts Thor's mystery friend, "we will tell you what we know, but it might not be as much as you'd like."

"Okay..." he trails off, staring at Helen, because she's always good to cut someone's bullshit off, but she merely sighs.

"Tony," he looks back at Strange then when the man calls him, and sees him leaning forward on his own chair, fingers steeple in front of him, his face a mask of gentle sorrow, and Tony isn't sure he likes it, "What Heimdall means is that we're not sure ourselves. Do you remember when I told you this was the only way?"

Tony nods, because he *did* remember.

"I thought you meant I had to die."

"For a moment there, it was what it looked like," Loki tells him, and Tony can't even process how unsettling it is to have this god explaining things to him in a sitting room, as if they're at a friendly gathering.

"You gathered the stones, and whatever you did with it, it worked," Thor tells him, his voice grateful as he smiles at Tony — the only one of them who doesn't seem fazed at seeing his friend suddenly years younger, "There was this... golden mist around you, and once Thanos was put down, the others started coming back. All of them. You brought all of them back — the Guardians checked some sources, and as far as we can tell, you managed to undo most of the harm that Thanos had done."

"It was what I asked for," he tells them, remembering the sudden *rush* of power within him, his absolute certainty that he could accomplish anything, do anything, fix *everything* — and knowing, deep down, that he couldn't. That this wasn't his purpose, that the universe wasn't meant to bend at someone's will like that, not for anyone: a lesson hard learned with Ultron and their Civil War and so many other mistakes, but learned and never to be forgotten, "I asked for it to undo what he did."

"And then you fell down," Thor continued, "Just lying there, and we all thought you were dead — Peter was screaming, and telling us to help you, but we knew there wasn't much we could do by then."

"Yielding the power of the stones is not something one does lightly," Heimdall adds in his grave voice, "I am told you were aware of this, that you had been told of its consequences."

Tony nods at that, because he did know.

“We tried taking the gauntlet off of you — we knew you had very likely sacrificed yourself to keep the universe safe, and having the stones in a single place would be... stupid,” Strange says, his voice going almost humorous in his last word, “But then something happened.”

“*What* happened?” he asks, at the end of his patience, because this was taking too long.

“We do not know,” Heimdall answers, and Tony has a feeling those are not words that man is used to saying in that combination very often.

“I was told you started to... shine. And there was golden mist involved, and you started to scream. The team brought you back into Shuri’s labs, and I, Shuri and Bruce did our best to understand what was happening, to help you, but it didn’t seem like we had to,” Helen explains.

“What do you mean?”

“When they touched the gauntlet, to pull it off of you, *something* activated. Extremis started to react with it — we’re not sure how, but when we got you back to the lab, you were fully reactive — temperature rising, burning skin, glowing as if you were on fire. It looked like one of the cases we had expected, that the work we did to change the virus had mutated back at the input of too much stimuli, but you weren’t burning *out*, you were just... burning. As if Extremis was trying to cure you, nonstop, as it did to those first test subjects, but something else was keeping it under control until it deemed you cured enough.”

“Back in the field, when you started screaming, it became everyone’s first priority to bring you back, but we, I and Nebula, and the Guardians, stayed behind to handle the aftermath. Nebula found the Time Stone there, and the gauntlet, which had actually fallen off.”

Suddenly he noticed that Strange *does* have his talisman back around his neck.

“What of the others?”

“Gone.”

He startles at the finality in Stranger’s voice, “We cannot find traces of the other five, and we can only theorize that they’re back into the universe, hopefully never to be seen again.”

“Vision?” he asks, and Thor’s features turn mournful at once.

“He didn’t... return. We do not know why, but as the Mind Stone has vanished as well, maybe he is still in possession of it, but... elsewhere.”

Tony is quiet for a second, hearing the explanation for what it is: plaintive words, that Thor himself probably didn’t believe.

“You still haven’t explained what happened to me.”

“Because we— We don’t know.”

Bruce sounds apologetic, and Tony can't quite make his peace with that. How can they *not know*?

"Is it Extremis? Did we trigger some unexpected reaction?"

Helen is already shaking her head.

"No. After two days of the burning routine, it started to die down. Bit by bit, your temperature went down back to normal, and as soon as we had the all clear, we started the removal procedure just like we had planned, and, as far as we can tell, it worked. Extremis had been active, but we took it out, just like we planned. It's not there anymore, we — I, and Bruce, and Shuri — we are sure of it."

"So, what? Extremis went overboard, and cured me of my old age as well? Is that it?"

When all the others did was trade looks, Tony got a bit fed up.

"Stop dancing around whatever it is that has you freaked out, and just *tell me*."

"This Extremis of yours did what it was supposed to do, but it wasn't alone," Loki takes over, and for once, Tony is grateful, because he is probably the one person — god, alien, whatever — who wouldn't measure the explanation out in tiny bits because of Tony's feelings, "Something *else* triggered it. Something *else* brought you back. You were dead, Stark — as dead as we all were just a few days ago — and something brought you back, controlled your healing, took off your years and... left you with a present."

Tony frowns at that.

"A present?"

Before the others can complain about it, Loki takes a couple of long strides across the room and, pulling a dagger out of *nothing*, cuts a line on Tony's hand.

He gasps, pulling his hand away, and then forgets to even listen to the shouting of the others because of Loki's action, because his hand is glowing slightly, as if someone lit up tiny golden lights across his damaged hand, and he watches, in horror and fascination, as his skin stitches back together, not even the trace of a scar left behind.

"What the fuck is this?" he whispers, and it serves to quiet everyone else down.

Loki is still staring at him from a few steps away, his face looking grim.

"We do not know," he repeats, and now Tony gets it.

They *really* have no idea what's going on with him.

"It's not Extremis, Tony," Bruce tells him, knowing that's where he'd go, "We tested for it, and we got rid of it, and it's not Extremis. None of the readings even come close."

"What is it doing? Is it..." he doesn't even know what to ask, because what the fuck?

He did not sign up for this shit.

He signed up for making a huge gesture, and sacrificing himself for the good of half of the universe, and then *dying*, even though he really didn't want to.

"You were unconscious for seventeen days," Helen begins again, her voice gentle in face of his shock, "And while you were, we did every test under the sun, everything we could think of, and the only thing it does is... protect you."

"What does that even mean, protect me?"

"It heals you from harm," Thor tells him calmly, and something — something about the way he speaks now, the way his voice sounds, the way everyone in the room *listens*, tells Tony that this man is not the same one who left them after Ultron, "Just like it did now."

"What if—"

"It's not controlling you, or manipulating you, in any way, shape or form — it's not particularly *magical* in its nature either. We have theories, but none of them are absolute. I tested it, my associates from the Sanctum tested it, and it's not influencing or controlling you, or harming you. It is dormant until it needs to heal you. We weren't sure you were going to wake up, or how, but it's harmless."

"I wouldn't call something that hijacked my body and changed it without my fucking consent as *harmless*," he tells Strange, trying his best to stay calm, but failing miserably.

"No, no one would," Bruce sets a hand on his arm, and Tony sighs, "But you're not in danger. And you're not a danger to anyone, as far as we could test it."

He runs a hand over his face, tired and worn out, and maybe *this* is what he was feeling before, this weirdness — there's nothing *wrong* with him anymore, is there?

He's healed of everything.

One by one the people in the room leave when he tells them he wants to be alone, and they understand.

Bruce makes him promise to come to dinner, the others are worried about him, and Helen promises to send him the full medical record of everything that happened while he was in her care, with Thor merely sets a hand on his shoulder and wishes him well, and suddenly, it's him and Strange in that room.

"You knew this would happen," he tells the magician, his voice trying for accusing, and only ever reaching sad.

"Not *this*, exactly, but I knew it wouldn't be what you expected. I knew you wouldn't stay dead, and I knew you would have a hard time dealing with this."

Tony doesn't say anything, because he isn't sure what to say.

Strange settles for a strained smile, and then he leaves too, leaving Tony to hide his face behind his hand as he sits there, pondering the new absurdity of his life.

“You saved my life.”

He startled so badly he almost falls off the chair, his heart beating a mile a minute as he stares at Loki, at the corner of the room, clearly having hidden in the shadows to wait for the others to leave.

“I owe you a debt.”

Tony scoffs.

“If we follow down that logic, half the universe owes me a debt.”

“I don’t know how you achieved what you did. I particularly don’t understand how you refused whatever pull those stones must have had to you, because the most I’ve ever had in my possession was two of them, and I almost went mad with power.”

Tony swallows dryly at that, because he does understand — but he also knows he doesn’t deserve any medals for not being a power crazy madman.

It is what it is.

“Your point, princess?” he goads, and receives a small smirk in return, something almost fond.

“They don’t know what happened to you, or what it is that it’s in you — but I know those stones, and I know how they are supposed to work, and although I cannot be certain of it, I can hazard a guess.”

Tony doesn’t say anything, he waits, because Loki is right.

Quill held that thing out of desperation, and Strange uses the talisman to work with it, but none of them even came *close* to having it all in his hands — Loki is the one who can understand this the most, probably.

“Those devices are more powerful than anything else in the universe, and I think, you’ve been bestowed a gift. Enjoy it. I know it’s hard for you, because you *have* to know things, but enjoy it. The magician himself has confirmed it — nothing bad will come of it. Enjoy your second chance.”

And then Loki leaves.

X

As much as it sounds like a good thing, Tony isn’t used to things *not having a bad side*.

Everything has a bad side, as far as he is concerned.

So he pours over the medical records Helen hands him when he shows up back at the Med bay a couple of minutes after Loki left, answering his questions with no hesitation, and does Tony question everything, using Helen and FRIDAY to check things out until his eyes feel like they're going to fall off his head from so much reading.

There's nothing wrong with him — physically.

Physically, he is as fine as he's ever been, probably better, because until his scare with palladium, he had never been particularly good at taking care of his health.

After hours of looking through records and test results, he finally gives up, and stares at Bruce, who had come to join him a couple of hours before, when Helen left the Compound — now that Tony is awake and conscious and fine, she has much to do, and there's no reason for her to stay at the Compound any longer.

“What's upsetting you?” Bruce finally asks, as Tony flips through the files again, the blue from the holograms casting his face in an even more ethereal light.

“There isn't a single thing in this whole situation that isn't upsetting to me, and I'm not even sure I've taken it all in yet.”

Bruce chuckles at that, and Tony takes a deep breath, because he knows his friend is just waiting.

As much as Bruce isn't that kind of doctor, he's always been good at listening.

“Do I even count as human anymore?” he finally asks the question that has been bothering him, swallowing dry as he waits for an answer.

Bruce cleans the lenses of his glasses on his lab coat, stalling for time, and it does nothing to assuage Tony's fears.

“As far—”

“— as you can tell?” he finishes, his voice sarcastic, “Come on, Bruce. Give me an honest answer here.”

Bruce sighs, closing his eyes.

“We had agreed on giving you a few more days to... deal with being alive before going into this, but we should have known better than to expect you not to prod and poke at all the problems instead of focusing on the good.”

“Yes, you should have known better, because I don't take things like this for granted. There *has* to be a downside to this.”

Bruce is silent for a second, and then he seems to steel himself and meets Tony's gaze head on.

“From a physiological point of view, you’d count as a human, but you’re no longer a baseline. You’re definitely enhanced, although we can’t pinpoint the origin, but the ability to heal — which we still don’t know the extension of, by the way — alone would give you enhanced status.”

“Is that what we’re going with for public consumption?”

Bruce snorts at that.

“Yes, it is. Everyone was nervous when you disappeared, and we had to tell the people *something*. You disappeared to a strange planet, people thought you dead, and then you basically saved everyone. And I mean *everyone*. And although that part is not public knowledge, the Council controlling the Accords, and governments all around, are aware of your part in it, and they wanted to know what had happened to you.”

“So you told them, what? I had gained a magical permanent band-aid from a couple of magical stones?”

“No. The official story is that you were using Extremis — the modified version — and it cured you, leaving some lingering effects. The healing is registered as your enhancement, but that’s all that’s on record.”

“And off-record?”

Bruce looks deeply uncomfortable with what he is going to say next, and it does nothing to calm Tony either.

“Come on, Bruce.”

“Loki and Heimdall seemed to agree that this healing thing seemed a bit... magical. So they did their own testing.”

“Meaning?” he prods, voice already growing with anger, because with this much stalling, he is absolutely sure he’s going to hate the answer.

“You’re still susceptible to most kinds of magic. Loki and Strange tried a few harmless spells, and they all took hold. Nothing set off the... healing ability unless it actually harmed you, and we didn’t try that far.”

“But?”

“But Maximoff’s magic bounces off. It can’t take hold, and you seem to be immune to it,” Bruce makes a small pause, gaging Tony’s reaction before going on, “By day fifteen we were worried — too worried. Your body was fine, your vitals were fine, but you weren’t waking up. She volunteered to look into your mind, see if you were... still there.”

“And?” he asks again, voice tight with anger, because the last thing he wanted in his life is that magic coming anywhere near him, ever again.

“It bounced off. She cannot affect you, her magic swirls around, and goes off in smoke. No matter the nature of the spell — trying to read your mind, or trying to move your hair, anything — it bounces off.”

Tony takes a minute to process it, and Bruce watches him carefully. He goes back to staring at his friend, head tilted to the side after a few moments.

“You’ve talked to Loki about this.”

It’s not a full out accusation, but it’s not too far from it either.

“We have.”

“And you agree with him.”

Bruce looks deeply uncomfortable — and Tony suddenly wants to know what happened between them all — Thor and Loki and Bruce, because there was no time before, and the way they trust each other now is definitely new.

“He told me of his theory — only me. The others are still just as in the dark as they can be, and I saw no reason to go ahead and talk about this, because we have no way of *knowing* it, but I—” he takes a deep breath, shrugging, “I do agree with him. It makes sense. If the stone powering your enhancement is the same thing that provided Wanda with her powers, then it would make sense that it would protect you from it. Strange didn’t try any magic with the actual Stone, but I bet it wouldn’t work on you either.”

Tony is quiet again, considering this, and it does make sense — he isn’t sure this is any better than flying blind, though.

“I don’t like this,” he tells Bruce, and the man nods at him, understanding.

“I wouldn’t either,” it’s his friend’s answer, and Tony sighs, staring out the window.

He doesn’t like this one bit.

“Do you want to stay here tonight?” Bruce asks him, looking around the med bay, and on any day, Tony would have scoffed and rolled his eyes, but right then, well, what can he say?

“Isn’t that breaking the rules?”

Bruce scoffs.

“Since when do you worry about that?” they trade a small smile, and Bruce goes on, “Plus, I really do think you should give yourself a couple more hours to... digest this. I don’t think you’ve had time to process everything, Tony, the good and the bad — and I’m not just talking about this,” he gestures vaguely towards Tony’s everything, “Give yourself some time before you have to get out there and deal with... everyone else.”

Tony is silent for a moment, looking at his friend.

“Did anyone fill you in on the whole break up thing?”

Bruce nods vaguely, shrugging.

“FRIDAY has been helpful.”

Tony snorts at that, because if there’s one thing his AIs always are is loyal to him, and she wouldn’t have given Bruce an impartial view on *anything* regarding their little spat.

Bruce smiles, small and fond.

“Nat talked to me too. And Shuri — she explained everything that happened in Wakanda, and also Barnes’ ... healing.”

Tony hums at that, taking a place on the bed, feeling more tired than he ought to be, but that’s probably leftover from the coma.

“He came back with Rogers, then?”

Bruce nods, and Tony decides not to ask anything else — he doesn’t want to, not yet.

He wants to enjoy the last little bit of peace he’ll have before facing all the others.

It’ll probably be the last little bit of peace he’ll have for months.

X

The fun thing about being in a magical-stone overdose induced coma is that Tony had spent those marvelous seventeen days without dealing with any crap from anyone.

As soon as he is officially freed from Medical, though, things change.

Apparently, he had been left alone the day before — or as much as they could, with all the visitors to explain his new condition to him — in case he had any reactions and imploded upon waking, or if he woke up with no memories, or something similar.

Now that he is officially in the land of the living again, he is fair game, starting from breakfast.

Truth be told, he managed to sleep very little that night — thoughts of those stones, of Thanos, of the power he had let go, of his disturbingly young face, all of it, hunting him down till the wee hours of morning, and then dragging him into an uneasy sort of slumber, from which he woke up before eight.

And then he made the mistake of heading to the kitchen.

In the whirlwind of finding out he had healing powers and said powers had decided to give him the face lift of a lifetime, it felt right not to ask what *exactly* had happened to the others, apart from being assured that everyone was *alive*.

He expects Rhodey to be there — maybe Pepper, Strange or Thor and his weird brother and their friend, and that's pretty much it.

He did *not* expect anyone else to be there too, but this morning Steve Rogers is in his kitchen.

It hadn't occurred to Tony until that very second that he is still angry at them, angry at everything. Saving half the universe was a top priority, so he hadn't allowed himself to go anywhere near those feelings during those days, he couldn't. He had a mission to accomplish, and accomplish it he did.

Well, he supposes he shouldn't be surprised, really.

They saved the world, the Avengers are back, he's pretty sure there were pardons waiting for all of them the second they set foot on US soil when they got back from Wakanda — the rest of them are probably around the Compound somewhere, and Tony feels unsettled about it. He is *angry*.

His rush of anger seems to be mistaken as hesitation, because Rogers smiles at him and pulls a chair back, as if inviting him to come have breakfast with him, and Tony feels trapped. Looking around, he sees Nebula at a corner of the kitchen, and he heads there with a nod to Rogers, noticing Rocket and Quill are nearby.

"Hey, man," Quill starts, looking at Tony and clearly trying his hardest not to stare, "Glad you're up and about."

Tony goes for a small smile at that.

"Yeah, we're all happy you're not dead. That would have sucked."

Tony chuckles at Rocket and grabs a mug of coffee, before leaning against the counter beside Nebula.

"It would," he agrees easily, looking around — his back is to the wall behind the counter, and he has Nebula on one side, Rocket on the other. Rogers is closer to the door than he is, but he has a feeling the three heroes closer to him would help if it came down to a fight, "You guys planning on sticking around for a bit?" he asks, and Peter smiles at him briefly before shaking his head.

"Nah. These two wanted to make sure you were alive, though, so we stuck around."

"Like you didn't want to stay," Rocket scoffs, while Nebula only glares at Peter, and Tony feels a rush of gratitude towards these people.

"Thank you. Not just for staying, but for everything — if it weren't for you guys, we wouldn't have won," he says, looking at Nebula and Rocket.

"Ah, finally someone recognizes my value for what it is," Rocket says, making Tony smile.

"We had to stay a while longer anyway — you and Nebula banged the ship a little more than it could take when you got back here," Quill adds, and Tony has to hide a smile when she

throws a butter knife at him, hitting the jacket instead of his face.

“If there’s anything I can do to help you out...” he offers, and Tony can see Peter glancing quickly at where Rogers is still sitting, and then back at him.

What have people been saying to the outsiders while he was in a coma?

“We’re heading there now, why don’t you come along?”

“Yeah, might do you earthlings some good to learn what *real* space tech is like,” Rocket says with a tiny smirk, and Tony smiles at him, nodding.

When they leave, Rocket takes the lead, Quill positions himself between Rogers and him, and Nebula is at his back, glaring with all her might.

How sad is it that these people he doesn’t even *know* are this willing to protect him from his own teammate?

How sad is it that they even think he would actually need it?

Tony spends the rest of the day hanging out with the Guardians and their tech, setting up a communication system, so they can give each other’s teams updates or ask for help, if they should need it.

Halfway through the morning, he gets a text from Rhodey, telling him he’ll be back by dinner time, and Bruce texts him on and off all day, monitoring his vitals — none of them calls him out on his hiding in this ship all day long, for which he is deeply grateful.

The Guardians plan on taking off at night, and there’s a certain rush in the air, which keeps him occupied, and Tony couldn’t have been happier for it if he *tried* — there’s too much going on inside his head, too many feelings to sort out, and he doesn’t particularly want to examine any of them right now.

He’s still angry, he’s still hurt, and now that impending death and doom aren’t at his door anymore, he doesn’t even know how fair he’s being.

Nebula and Rocket pull him to the side before they are about to leave, and Tony is intrigued.

“You know, hanging out here these days, even with all the work we put into fixing this thing and all, we heard some things, and I’m not sure I like it,” Rocket begins, and Tony tilts his head to the side.

“What do you mean?”

“There should be loyalty,” Nebula says, her voice in that clipped tone she always has, frowning angrily — or even more angrily than usual, “in a team. You don’t leave people behind, you don’t give up on them, you don’t betray them just because you disagree.”

“I know that,” he tells them, an angry tilt to his own voice, because if they are going to start blaming him too, he’ll kick them out of his backyard.

“Good. Then get the rest of them to see it too,” Rocket says, a scolding tone in his voice, “Because from the things we’ve been hearing, you guys aren’t very good at keeping it together.”

Tony sighs, rubbing his eyes and shaking his head.

“Look, things got—”

“Stark,” a new voice says, and he turns to see the green girl — Gamora, Nebula’s sister, *Thanos’s favorite daughter* — talking to him, “None of us here has a great track record. We didn’t always stay on the right side of things, and we all did things we regret, but we got through it because we had each other’s backs. Once we got that down, the rest fell into place,” she comes closer and puts a hand on his shoulder, “What you did, denying the power those stones gave you, doing only what you set out to do and nothing else, that shows how strong you are, how *good* you are,” she stares into his eyes when she says that, as if willing him to believe it, “Just because you messed some things up, it doesn’t mean you’re not willing to do what’s right, it doesn’t mean you’re not good.”

“I—” he swallows dryly at that, “I know that.”

“Good. Then don’t let the rest of them convince you otherwise.”

He nods at that, and he gets it — or maybe *they* get it, better than even he and Rogers and all the others did.

“Of course, you could also just not deal with it at all,” Quill states, smiling wide at him and making Tony frown.

“How would I do that?”

“Come with us,” Nebula says, her voice quiet but determined, and Tony stares at them for a bit, not quite believing it.

“Are you guys serious?”

“Why not? You’d fit right in. Roughish good looks, kick ass weaponry — I took a look at your suits, man, they are *great* — crappy past, daddy issues, it’s like it was written in the stars.”

Tony scoffs at that, and, to tell the truth, he is tempted, *oh*, is he tempted.

Not only because he would be *in space*. In actual space, dealing with tech he can only dream of now, but also because all of this mess, everything they’ll have to fix now that they aren’t almost dying, everything they’ll have to go through, the backlash from his stunt with the stones, everything — it could all just stay behind him, in the past, on Earth, and he could go off gallivanting through the Galaxies.

How awesome would that be?

Even for Rogers and Barnes and Romanoff and all the rest.

Maybe they'd be better off without him around.

And then he looks out through the window, to the barely lit compound where he knows there are at least two people awake even in the middle of the night, at least one of them waiting for him to get back inside. He thinks of Peter, with no proper backup, no one else he would listen to since he barely listens to Tony anyway. He thinks of Rhodey on his own to deal with the braces on his legs, and of Bruce and the absence of the Hulk. Thor and whatever he is trying to accomplish now, and all of the politics that, apart from Natasha and Rhodey, none of them really knows how to navigate, and he knows he can't. He can't leave them behind just because he has a chance to forget it all.

"Thanks, but you don't give up on your team just because you disagree, right?"

Quill smiles briefly at him and offers his hand to shake.

"Offer still stands. Any time you want off Earth, give us a call, and we'll swing by."

"Thanks, Quill."

He says his goodbyes to the rest of them, leaving Nebula for last, and he looks at her — defensive and angry and broken — before pulling her in for a hug. She tenses in his arms, and he's glad she didn't stab him — although with the healing thing, he'd recover — and slowly she hugs him back.

"Thank you," he tells her, taking a step back as they stare at each other, "For having our backs, and for bringing me home, and for dealing with him in the end. Thank you."

She nods at him, squeezing his arms briefly, before turning around and disappearing into the confines of the ship.

Tony takes one last look around and leaves the ship, standing on the grass, staring at it until they disappear in the night sky.

He stays, looking up at the stars for a little while longer, and he hears Rhodey before the man reaches him.

"Did they ask you to come with?"

"Yeah, they did."

"Why did you say no?"

"This is our home, right?" he says, turning to stare at his best friend, "Where were you today? How come you weren't the first person I saw when I woke up?" he asks, changing the subject because he doesn't feel like talking about it right now.

"Dealing with the grown-up side of things, Tones. Someone has to."

They start walking back to the house, and Tony sighs.

“Yeah, how is that coming along, by the way?”

“Better than expected. No one wants to give the people who brought back half the universe any grief. I’m sure it’ll die down in a month or two — or at least until we fight a villain big enough to destroy a couple of blocks, but so far, public opinion on us is great.”

“By that you mean that everyone has been pardoned, and they are all full Avengers again,” he says, taking a seat at the table as Rhodey sits across from him.

“Yeah,” his friend agrees, looking tired and worn out. He keeps staring, and it starts to make Tony uncomfortable, “God, Tones, you look so fucking *young*. I feel like I should tell you to go to bed.”

Tony snorts at that.

“Yeah, because that always worked out so well. Besides, I don’t look *that* young.”

Rhodey keeps staring, probably remembering the stupid kid he had to dorm with his freshman year at MIT — the difference between fourteen and eighteen felt so big back then.

“How are you dealing with that?”

Tony shrugs, picking at the sleeve of his shirt for lack of what to do.

“I’m... not thinking about it. Yesterday was just... too much to take in, and today...” he trails off.

“Today you spent the whole time with people who didn’t really know you before, so they wouldn’t even see much of a difference.”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Did they tell you what happened for real? Because all we got was a vague explanation, a lot of mentions to weird science, and I’m not convinced.”

“They don’t know either,” he says, finality in his voice, and Rhodey respects his wish not to talk about it when he changes the subject, even though he very clearly doesn’t buy it for a minute, “So, how about you tell me what’s going on since Wakanda?”

Rhodey’s face says enough about what he’s going to hear, but Tony does his best to keep his opinions to himself as he listens.

Apparently, he wasn’t too far off before — as soon as people started returning home, and news of their last confrontation with Thanos started going around, there had been an unanimous claim towards forgiving the rogue Avengers.

They had to sign the Accords, they had to understand what had changed in it since they left, but they were pardoned and brought back to the US, including Wanda, who wasn’t even America, and Barnes, who wasn’t even all cleared medically speaking.

His involvement in bringing everyone back was kept under wraps for about three days, and then they had returned him to the med bay at the Compound, and a twisted, slightly crazy version of what really happened started making rounds through the news cycle, and most of it involved Tony pulling a Jesus and sacrificing himself for everyone else.

People still didn't know he was awake again, and Rhodey recommended that he talk to Pepper before tackling whatever he was going to do now, because it would cause commotion, no matter how they wanted to spin it — because the truth of it is: he could just let it all go. He is already considered out of duty now, and he has changed enough that it wouldn't be impossible to convince people he isn't Tony Stark. He could have something he had never had before: a clean slate.

All his life, Tony had always been *something*. Howard's son. A prodigy. A genius. A weapons dealer. A lost cause. A hero. Iron Man.

Now he could be... nothing, if that's what he wanted.

As Rhodey tells him that last part, Tony starts to think that maybe this is what his best friend wants him to do.

“You think I should... what? Disappear? Start over from nothing?”

Rhodey tries to look apologetic, but fails miserably.

“Look, Tones, I'm not saying it's what you *should* do, but honestly? Haven't you given enough? Done enough? You *died*, Tones. You actually *died*. I saw the medical reports — something brought you back, but you *died* because you got it in your head that only you could do it, and, hey—” he raises a hand, signing for Tony not to interrupt and let him finish, “— I know Harry Potter told you you were the Chosen One or whatever, but you did it, okay? It's done. If you want out, if you want to leave, to go away and never come back, hell, if you want to go along with those crazy people to meet Darth Vader in a Galaxy far away or whatever, *no one* could blame you. No one. Because it's not their right, and because you've done *enough*. More than enough. More than any of them did, anyway,” he stops talking and takes a deep breath, leaning forward until he and Tony are just a breath away from each other, “But if you stay? You'll have to deal with all the assholes who turned the last year of your life hell, who left you for dead in a bunker in Siberia, who pretended to be on your side until it wasn't good enough anymore. And you'll have to do it with them thinking they were right, and that you *dying* was just another stunt you had to pull. Is that what you want?”

No. That's not what Tony wants — but he doesn't want to forget who he is either.

“Look, Rhodey, I get what you're doing. I do. I know where you're coming from, because no one, not even Pepper, has been around for longer than you. I know you get it, you get *me*, but —” he pauses, lets out a careful breath before going on, “I've fought for this, Rhodey. To be who I am, to stand where I stand, more than I did at SI, and more than I tried with Pepper, I— I fought long and hard and literally to the death to be Iron Man, because it's what *I wanted to do*. I still do. Dying and getting an extreme makeover didn't change that.”

Rhodey stares at him for a long moment, before leaning back on his chair, his face that careful mask of indifference he gets when he knows he's won and doesn't want to brag about it.

"Okay. I accept that, if it's the real truth," he pauses again, measuring his words to make the most effect, Tony is sure, "But just tell me *this*: if this is your chance to leave the crazy behind and start over with Pepper? Kids, marriage, the whole deal — are you *sure* this is what you're choosing to do? Because I'm gonna tell you *now*, Tones, she won't be your fiancée anymore if you keep this up."

He gets up and squeezes Tony's shoulder once before leaving, and Tony feels *wrecked*.

Is this what he chooses to do?

X

The next morning, he is up at nine, which is surprising, and as soon as he opens his eyes, he almost screeches in surprise again — Pepper is sitting on his bed, a fond, relieved smile on her face.

"They asked me to wait until you were settled in, so I gave it a day," she tells him — contained and proper and lovely, and everything he thinks he's ever wanted in a woman his whole life.

"Hey, Pep," he greets, and she half-laughs, half-sobs, before throwing herself at him, and he catches her easily, hugging her tightly against him.

The last time he did this, he was *so sure* he wouldn't be coming back, that he would *never* get a chance at this again — for a moment, he's almost pissed at Rhodey, because their conversation the night before is the perfect set up for this, and Tony will eat every one of his suits if his best friend didn't know Pepper would be here, first thing in the morning.

They stay like that for a while, and then Tony gets up and finds proper clothes, and drags Pepper to the small kitchen attached to his suite so they can talk.

"I can't get over this—" she trails off over her coffee, waving towards him, and he gets it, he does.

"What?" he shots back, a small smirk on his lips, even if the mention of his appearance causes him a small bout of panic, "Worried that people will think you're a cradle robber now?"

She rolls her eyes and doesn't respond, and Tony takes the time to just take her in.

God, these past few weeks must have been hell on her. With him disappearing in that ship, and then not knowing what is going on, and then him dying and being in a coma and— Pepper doesn't deserve what he puts her through.

She really doesn't.

“Would you stay?” he asks her, not willing to tip toe around this, “If I— I’ve been talking to Rhodey and—” he kind of stares for a second, missing her talking in between his sentences, and staring into her eyes, he *knows* she is aware of the conversation they are having.

He also has a very bad feeling that she *knows* how this is going to end.

“Rhodey thinks I can have a clean slate, a fresh start. Start from scratch, everything, and— If I did, would you stay?”

He hates how young his voice sounds then, how small — and it has nothing to do with his de-aging or magic, but only because if there’s one person in the whole *universe* he would consider giving Iron Man up for, this is she.

“Oh, Tony,” she begins, reaching out slowly, with a fond smile on her face, and taking his hand in hers. He raises her hand to his cheek, and turns around slowly to press his lips against her palm, making her give him a sad smile, “You had the best excuses in the *world* before this, Tony. You were older, and you didn’t have any powers, and there were so many people better suited to it than you for that alone. You had people asking you to give this up, to leave this behind, mostly because there was always the chance that one more hit could be your last, and you didn’t take that chance *then*, even with all the odds stacked against you, you want me to believe you would do that *now*? When you have all the cards?”

“I would do that for you,” he tells her, and he believes it too. He would, “Just say the word, and—”

She smiles at him again, patting his cheek fondly before pulling her hand away, and Tony closes his eyes for a second, knowing what’s coming.

“I didn’t like who you were before all of this, you know,” she starts slowly, making Tony open his eyes again, “Before you changed directions, before Obadiah — I admired you, and I could see the person you *could be* shining below the surface, but you were always pulling away, and always hiding that, because— I don’t know why, really, but maybe because you thought that caring as much as you did, *as much as you do*, would make you soft, or weak, or...” she trails off with a shrug, before sighing, “And then you were gone, and you came back a changed man, and I thought, this is it — this is the man I admire. And you know what brought that man out, more than anything? Iron Man. Not because you’re less than him, I never fully understood what Natasha meant when she separated the both of you, because you *are* Iron Man, and I get that now. Truth be told, I got that *then*, too, but I wanted to believe that we could work around it, but, Tony, we can’t,” her voice breaks then, and she takes a second to get a hold of herself before going on, “I love you,” she states simply, and his breath catches when she smiles, “A part of me always will love you like no one else in this world, but I’m not built to be with a superhero. I can’t understand what makes you go against all odds and keep putting yourself at risk, but that’s what makes you *you*, and I love that,” she smiles at him again, but Tony doesn’t dare move right now, “Never once, since you said you were retired, since they left and the Avengers stopped... being a thing, I saw you as happy as you were before, when you had them with you, trusting they had your back. And when they left, I realized something that, well, to be quite honest, hurt me very much at first, but I get it now,” she reaches out again, putting her hand on his cheek once more, smiling fondly, “You

need that more than you need me. You're more Iron Man than whoever it is you were before Afghanistan, and Tony, *there is nothing wrong with that.*"

He closes his eyes then, a tear sliding down his face as Pepper brushes it off, and he feels her getting up and pulling him to her, kissing the top of his head as she stands, in her ridiculous heels, as he sits there and feels miserable.

"I love you, but I can't make you happy, because I'll always make you feel as if you're betraying me, or endangering me, or disappointing me every time you leave to be a super hero, and, Tony, you don't deserve that," she kisses the top of his head, and he breathes her in, "*I don't deserve that either. Do you understand?*"

He takes a deep breath and nods slowly, and she pulls away after a second, ruffling his hair slightly as she lets go.

"It wouldn't be proper for a woman in my position to be dating a kid your age anyway," she tells him, dabbing discreetly at her eyes, and Tony snorts, "I know Rhodey hopes you could quit, but deep down, he knows you wouldn't. He knows you just as well as I do."

He nods at her, quiet again, for lack of knowing what to say.

"Just promise me one thing," she asks him, eyes serious.

"Anything," he answers, his voice rough with tears.

"Don't go into that team like it was before — you are their equal, and their mistakes are not yours to correct, just like yours aren't theirs either. Go back to being an Avenger, but not like what it became after Ultron, Tony. Either you are all a team or you're not — don't take things in half again. Don't hide things from them because you think they'll disapprove, and don't let them walk all over you because you feel guilty. Go in as a team, or call the space people back," she finishes with a teasing tone.

He nods, swallowing dry at that, and she smiles at him once more.

"I should go — I just needed to see with my own eyes that you were alive and well again."

He smiles at her then, his eyes still wet.

"Would that be all then, Ms Potts?" he asks, the hint of teasing in his tone, and Pepper laughs, bright and clear.

"That'd be all, Mr Stark."

With one last smile, she leaves.

When Tony looks back at the counter they're sitting by, he sees the ring he gave her months ago.

This is it, then.

This is it.

He's an Avenger again.

X

Tony isn't the *least* bit surprised when FRIDAY tells him, early in the afternoon, that the *team* has congregated in one of the conference rooms, and he is asked to head there, so they could have a *debriefing*.

He scoffs at that — more like an ambush, but he supposes he will have to deal with that at some point.

When Tony arrives, the first thing he does is take a quick look around the room, and he isn't disappointed — they are *all* here. Rogers, Barnes, Romanoff, Wilson, Maximoff, even *Barton*, all there. In what appears to be an unconscious divide, there are a couple of seats empty between them and Rhodey and Bruce, and Tony takes a seat between the two, nodding politely at the others. Thor and his band of weird magicians is absent, and Tony isn't sure if he's happy about that or not.

The table is round.

He is suddenly overcome with the desire to laugh until he cries.

"It's good to see you," Natasha tells him, her voice quiet, and he nods at her, not trusting whatever he might say if he opens his mouth.

He's just going to get through this meeting, and then he'll figure out what to do about... everything else.

"I called this meeting because I thought it would be a good idea to have everyone on the same page if we are to collaborate together again. Ever since our... disagreement—" Steve starts, but Clint snorts, and Tony can feel Rhodey tensing beside him.

"Got something to say, Hawkeye?"

"Just... *disagreement*. Don't you mean, that time Tony went over our heads and got us all in jail?"

The thing is that his tone isn't even bitter — Clint *honestly* thinks he's joking. And suddenly, Tony can see, clear as day, as this is all going to turn out if he doesn't *say something*, doesn't *do something* right now, before it gets out of hand.

One day, Pepper will stop being right all the time, but not today, apparently.

He *has* a second chance, that much is true, and he'll be damned if he doesn't make it count.

"Let's just—" he waves a bit, before the two others can actually start an argument, leaning forward on the table and staring at Steve, "Let's get some shit out in the open before we start this, shall we? Because you see, here's the thing, I died," he lets that sink in, staring at each

others before going on, “I thought I was gone, and believe me, I made my peace with it, but apparently, I got a second chance at this, so let’s just make the most of it, and by that I mean, let’s not start *this*—” he gestures around the table, “— by leaving things out.”

He stares at the people across from him for a second, finally settling on Rogers.

“You betrayed me. And I don’t care what you believed in — we could have worked on the Accords without that ridiculous fight in Berlin, and we could have made all of it work, but the fact that you just *threw caution to the wind* because your buddy over there was involved, makes me believe you’re not fit to be the leader of this team, in any capacity.”

“Tony, the Accords—” Rogers start, but Tony scoffs, and interrupts him.

“That wasn’t about the Accords, and you know it.”

“What was it about then?” it’s Natasha who asks, and she looks puzzled.

Suddenly, it hits Tony that Rogers *might not have told them*.

“Did he ever tell you *why* the fight broke out in Siberia? Why we didn’t just all came back as a big, happy family after a day trip to the world’s creepiest freezer?” Tony asks, a suspicious tone in his voice, and none of them actually nods, they just stare.

“Wasn’t it because of the Accords?” Sam asks.

Tony shakes his head, a bitter smile on his otherwise perfect face.

“The Winter Soldier killed my parents,” he lets that sink in for a moment, not caring that Barnes flinches from it, because if he can’t handle the truth, then he shouldn’t be in this room or this team, “Zemo had been after the video files, and he showed them to me, right in that Hydra base, with them right beside me. The other super soldiers were already gone, and, yes, I did act irrationally, but *he killed my mother and I had to watch it*,” he stops, looks up to see Wanda’s shocked expression, tears gathering in her eyes, “Rogers had known about it for *months*. But because it was about Barnes, he didn’t see fit to tell any of us,” he states, the last stab in this particular fight, seeing Rogers cringing in his chair.

“Steve?” Wanda turns to him, and it breaks Tony’s heart a bit to see that, because this young woman trusts Steve more than she trusts herself, and to see *this*, it’s heartbreaking.

“I thought I was protecting him,” Rogers whispers, and Tony can see Natasha shaking her head, her mouth a thin line.

“Apart from that,” he begins again, their attention on him again, “Why didn’t you tell me about the hidden soldiers? Why weren’t you honest from the beginning?”

“We thought you wouldn’t believe us,” Wilson tells him, and Tony stares at him again, hard and cold.

“What did I do when I found out about the base, about the soldiers, about all of it?”

“You went after Steve to help him,” Wanda replies, as if something is finally making sense for her, for the first time, “We thought you had used the information Sam gave you to betray Steve, but you went there to help, and that’s how Zemo broke you. You went against the Accords, you went against everything you had been fighting for, and then you found out Steve had hidden the truth from you.”

Tony turns to Rogers then, his breathing calm, no anger apparent, no contempt, just the truth, bared for all to see.

“If you had trusted me, like you expect everyone to trust you, not a single one of those things would have happened. I doubt Thanos would be much different, and things might have even taken a turn for the worse there, I honestly don’t know, but all that mess? All of that? It would have been avoided. The Accords were coming, whether we liked it or not, and by signing that, like you actually *did* now, we would have had front seats to guide it, like Natasha realized, which is why she supported me at first,” he stops and takes a deep breath, letting it go out of him slowly, “I’m not saying I’m blameless, because I’m not. I was acting on guilt and fear when I rushed into that, and I didn’t even try to explain the whole process I was expecting to go through with the Accords after we had signed it, because I actually did think you all would have figured that out: that we wouldn’t let that stop us from doing good, that we would revert whatever crap Ross tried to shove down our throats — down the line, because that’s how politics work. I was panicked, I was in a bad place, and I didn’t think,” he pauses and looks at the others, “Even when you got arrested, did you really think Rogers would have been able to get you out without FRIDAY’s help, even if he didn’t know she was there, cutting security feeds, helping him and Natasha along? I’m not exempting myself from blame on the Accords, but on that fight in Siberia?” he scoffs, and turns to Wanda, “You *volunteered for Hydra* because of a missile that had a Stark stamp on it, even though, by the time that set of weapons was being produced, I wasn’t even the one dealing them. And I’m not saying that frees me from guilt, because I do know what the history of my company has caused, but that wasn’t on me, *personally*, and yet you became what you are today so you could get your revenge *on me*, not my business, not on the man double dealing weapons, on me. Because it was *my name* on that bomb. T’Challa went after Barnes when Barnes hadn’t even done anything wrong. He went after him for revenge, and it took him *days* to snap out of it — all of that because someone messed with your family, and now you’re telling me I overreacted when I found out that the guy who caused a split down my team, the guy I had funded the search for, the guy I was actually trying to help, running the risk of being lumped with the rest of you in jail when I got back, had killed my parents, *my mother*, and the guy who pretended to be my friend, who was our *leader*, had hidden that from me. How does that look to you right now? Because to me, it looks like hypocrisy.”

He lets his words sink in, getting up slowly from his seat.

“So, you see, we’ll have to fight together, and we’ll have to find a way to make this work, but from now on, I’m not taking the blame for everyone else’s shit, and I’m not hiding my head in the sand because I’m afraid it might mess this up — we fucked up, big time. Until we can work that out? We’re not a team. And when we are again, I’m not following *you*,” he finishes, looking at Rogers sharply.

He turns and leaves, not caring about the chaos he leaves behind.

It's about time he went to work in his lab, anyway.

X

The thing about Tony being Tony is that Steve never quite got the hang of dealing with him.

It's not easy.

And not in a way that Steve finds difficult to talk to people on a normal level — Natasha isn't easy either. Neither is Bruce or any of the others, but they are... comprehensible, at a level Steve can understand.

He can't make heads or tails of Tony on his best days, and on the worst ones, he feels as if he's floating in the open sea, not a boat on sight, without a life jacket.

The thing about Tony is that he's sarcastic, and he always sounds as if his opinion is the one opinion that matters, no doubt in his mind, and people get offended with his attitude, or angry with his dismissive ways, but they handle it, because they think, oh, Tony Stark is an asshole.

So when Tony *actually* attacks, when he *actually* lashes out, when he actively tries to hurt you, it catches people off guard, because they think they *knew* that Tony is an asshole. It makes them unprepared for his actual rage when he unleashes it.

Then he comes along, strips you of every shred of self-respect you have, and leaves you to hang with the whole team staring at you, and makes you feel like you don't even deserve to be alive, let alone be a part of any team, anywhere, ever.

"You know," it's Clint who starts, and Steve closes his eyes, because whatever comes towards him now, he knows he deserves it, "when we share the problems with the class, I think 'Hey, you know that guy I'm running around with, he killed one of our teammates' parents, and I've known about it for months, but didn't tell him' is one of the things that should be out, for the people who went to jail over it to know."

Steve doesn't know how to respond, but he does open his eyes to stare at Clint, and then slowly looks at Natasha, who is now staring at him as if she's seeing him for the first time.

Wanda is still trying to understand the situation, he can tell — she's staring ahead, not meeting his eyes, hands contorting on her lap, looking even more lost than before. So many blows to her life in the past weeks, especially the fact that Vision hadn't come back with all the others, and now Steve is responsible for one more thing.

"I'm sorry," he tells them all, and hears Rhodey scoff quietly at the table — such a difference from the man who was willing to go to Court Martial for them, but Steve gets that this is different now, this is *more*.

Back then, it was about getting things done to save the world — right now, it's about bringing their team back together before the next threat comes, and Rhodey knows, just as well as Steve, that they can't build themselves like they did before, on a foundation of shaky trust and no true respect.

The fact that, in the end, it had been Tony, Rhodey's best friend, who had to sacrifice himself *again* to save them all probably doesn't help either.

"I don't think sorry is gonna cut it," Rhodey says, and Steve takes a deep breath, considering his next move carefully.

"This changes everything."

He looks up sharply when he sees Natasha staring at him, her gaze sharp and just a little angry.

"It changes everything. When you left on your own, when you *came back*, broken and beaten and shield-less, we all thought Tony had betrayed us, Steve. Do you understand how fucked up that is?"

"I told you guys that whatever happened in that bunker wasn't Tony's fault," he says, knowing it's an empty excuse.

"And we thought you were being noble, and trying to get us not to hate Tony," Clint answers, "God, man, when I came back, I refused to even deal with him. Not even when I knew that he was the one to get me and Scott home, to our families, much easier than it could have been, because I was actually *afraid* he'd... I don't know, set a trap or some shit. How could you do that, Steve?"

He closes his eyes again, all of his wrong choices staring right back all the same.

"I didn't think," it's his only answer.

He hears a chair making noise as it drags back from the table, and he looks up, thinking he'll see Rhodey or Natasha getting up to leave, but the one who's getting up is Bucky.

His best friend stares at him, eyes serious, and broken, and he looks... empty. Like someone who lost everything, and then sees the last hope he has being snatched away.

"I'm not worth this," he almost whispers, and then turns around and leaves.

Steve doesn't know when the others leave, he doesn't listen if they talk to him anymore, because he knows what's just happened, and he can't believe that this is it.

He might just have lost Bucky.

X

Bucky knows every inch of the compound, and he is well aware that it isn't healthy.

He has good memory, so he could, potentially, use it as an excuse, but truth is that he knows every inch of it because for the past two weeks — ever since they got back from Wakanda, pardoned and formally accepted as an Avenger, whatever that means, he studied every nook and cranny of the place, because he just couldn't help himself.

It hadn't been this bad in Wakanda, with his own little house, his own little things, no arm but also nothing to worry about except for the work he had to do and the food he needed to put on his own table.

In his time there, he could forget who he was, who he had been, and treat all of this new world thing as a second chance, as a time to heal, to be better, to work towards making up for the things he had done.

And then Thanos happened, and Steve came back, and he couldn't say no to Steve, not when his best friend needed his help.

Except that now he can see that he may be failing Steve too, because Steve... Steve is not okay.

The more he finds out about the things Steve has been doing, the more he sees that it's very likely that Steve hasn't been okay ever since he was found in the ice. What makes him feel even worse, though, is that he can't help but see this as his own fault.

If he hadn't fallen, if he hadn't been captured, if he had been stronger when Hydra caught him, if he had been able to *help his best friend*, then the man wouldn't be running around, fucking his own team over, messing up his whole life, putting their lives in danger, just to save *him*.

He wasn't even the man Steve thought he was, anyway. Not anymore. It's all his fault, and he's not worth this — all this trouble, all this fighting, everything the rest of the team will put Steve through.

The others won't let him leave, though, he knows that. He's not good for Steve, that much is very clear, but the people who followed Steve, hell, they'd probably follow that stupid punk again if he asked, and they will want Bucky close — but the rest of them...

Maybe he can make the rest of them see reason.

X

"I would be offended that you think you can sneak up on me in a place I designed myself, but it seems like the arrogance of super soldiers knows no bounds these days."

Tony heard Barnes coming, and even if he hadn't, Friday had warned him that the man was on his way to the lab as soon as it became clear that that's where he was headed. He has no idea what Barnes wants with him, and he has no idea what to do with this situation either.

He has no idea about a lot these days, mostly because dying will do that to a person. He almost wants to ask for a few days to get his bearings, but he doesn't think he's allowed — hell, even if he did get a few days to get his bearings, he wouldn't know what to do with it.

You fall, you get back up and keep on marching on, that's the thing he has to do — it's how he's always dealt with everything.

Maybe now that everyone is back, maybe now that the threat he has been dreading for the past six years has actually come to pass, he can process this in a different manner, in a different way.

Maybe he'll even be able to forgive the people who wronged him, and be forgiven by the ones he hurt as well.

He turns around, and sees Barnes standing close to the door, looking ready to bolt, and Tony sighs, running a hand over his eyes quickly — maybe this is a good place to start. If he can work things out with Barnes, he can do that with everyone else, he's sure of it.

“So, what's up, Elsa?”

Barnes takes exactly one step into the lab and then stops, apparently questioning his right to be there, which, as far as Tony can see, is fair.

He waves the man closer to a stool he has lying around, and waits as the (hopefully) former assassin comes in and takes a seat.

“I'm sorry,” the man starts, looking at Tony with broken eyes quickly, and then looking down and away, and Tony can feel his resolve to make this difficult melting away with practically no fight.

Damn, but Barnes looks *broken*.

“I can see that,” he answers, drawing Barnes's gaze to him once again, “I don't... Look, I tried to kill you, you tried to kill me, we both survived, and that's, you know, not cool, but it's in the past. You died, I died, we came back, let's just move on, ok?”

“It's not— It can't be that easy.”

Tony huffs a small laugh.

“Of course it can. You think a single one of these people living in this place can afford to *not* let things go?”

“You just told Steve you don't trust him,” Barnes points out, and Tony nods.

“Yeah, and I don't. I think I trust Rhodey and Bruce, and— that's about it, from the people who were in that room. It doesn't mean we can't, you know, work together. We'll fix this. We can fix this.”

Suddenly Barnes is looking at Tony as if he has never seen anything quite like him, ever.

“You're serious.”

“Of course I am.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s how this works.” Suddenly, Tony straightens his eyes, staring at Barnes with a calculative gaze, “Why did you come here? Actually, why did you come here, like, ten seconds after I dissed your best friend?”

Barnes actually flinches at that.

“Steve doesn’t— I don’t—” he sighs, running a hand through his too long hair, “I don’t deserve to be here. I’m not like you guys, I didn’t make those mistakes because I thought I was doing the right thing, and Steve—” the man shakes his head, “He gets blind, you know? I’m not sure if it’s the guilt or what, but he just gets blind when I’m around. I’m not good for this, I shouldn’t be here.”

Tony scoffs a bitter little laugh at that.

“So you came down here because you thought I could ask you to leave, and then you’d have a reason to do that. So Steve could, what, heal?”

“So he could stop screwing his life up trying to save mine,” Barnes mutters, and Tony sighs again.

It’s too early for this. It’s too early *in life* for this.

“You do know that if I were to do that, the only thing it would accomplish would be Steve leaving to go after you, right?”

Barnes doesn’t answer, but Tony knows deep down the man knows this too.

“Look, Barnes, I’m not your keeper — I’m not even sure I’m my own keeper right now, because I’m fucked up after this whole thing. Dying and coming back and *this*,” he gestures to himself vaguely, “I know we didn’t really get a good face to face before, but I don’t look like this. This isn’t my face anymore, and that is fucking me up, but, you know what, this is not the point,” he takes a deep breath, “The point is that, if you don’t want to be here, then don’t be here,” he states very calmly, “And by that I mean, go talk to Steve, and *tell him* you want out. You don’t have to do this whole super hero thing if you don’t want to, no one can make you — hell, I’m sure Shuri would let you back in Wakanda in a heartbeat. Go back to, I don’t know, what were you even doing there?” he asks, genuinely curious, and waits.

“Raising goats,” he replies after a few seconds, and Tony can’t help it — he laughs. It’s short lived and he *knows* it’s inappropriate, but he can’t help himself.

“Goats?”

The soldier nods, something in his eyes softens at the sound.

“In a farm. I didn’t put the arm back in until we heard Thanos was coming — the kids from the village would help me, and I was just...” he trails off with a small shrug, and Tony smiles at him.

“Healing.”

Bucky tilts his head, considering it.

“Waiting. I knew it wouldn’t last, but it was good.”

“Do you want to go back?”

The other man doesn’t answer for a long time, and Tony starts to get impatient — his quota for meaningful conversation has already been filled for a month now.

“Look, last night, those space people asked me to go with them. Ten minutes later, my best friend told me I could resign from being myself and start over, doing whatever, being whatever, and both times, I said no. This, the team, Iron Man, protecting the Earth — this is what I *do*. It’s what I *am*. But I *know* that, Barnes, I *chose* that. You don’t have to choose this if you don’t want to. No one would blame you for wanting to raise goats for the rest of your life, and if they do, then they should fuck off and mind their own business. You’ve had a lifetime of HYDRA telling you what to do, you don’t need that now.”

Barnes looks uncomfortable for a few seconds, looking down and away.

“Steve—”

“Steve doesn’t *own* you,” he snaps, more angrily than he intended to, “If he went after you and imploded his own life to do it, that’s on *him*, not you. You didn’t ask him to, and I’m sure you wouldn’t have asked if you could either. Those were *his* choices, Barnes. Make your own now, but not for him.”

He waits a little longer, and when Barnes seems content to just stare at the floor between them, Tony shrugs the awkwardness off and turns back to his designs — he’s lost some weight with the getting younger thing, and he’ll have to redesign some stuff with the nanites and think about testing it out soon. Tony gets lost for a few minutes, and startles a bit when Barnes’s voice sounds beside him again.

“When you said Wanda volunteered...” he trails off, and Tony glances at him sideways before scratching his head quickly.

“A Stark Industries missile hit her building. Killed her parents, left her and her brother stranded in there until rescue came, hours later. She was a kid, she was scared, and hurt, and angry, and HYDRA preys on that.”

“But she volunteered,” he says again, as if confirming it, and Tony takes a second to look at him before nodding.

“Yeah. She volunteered.”

“And you still took her in, and put her in your team.”

“No,” he says, going back to studying the screens around him, trying very hard to keep his voice light, “Steve took her in, and let her in the team. Actually, *Barton* did that, and no one corrected him, so. She did help us fight Ultron.”

“Wasn’t she the one who helped create that thing?”

Tony just stares at him for a moment, before sighing.

“Please don’t kill the resident witch.”

Barnes snorts at that.

“I won’t.”

“Because you won’t be around to do it?” he risks asking, seeing that Barnes is getting up to leave.

The other man stops and stares at Tony for a long moment, before shaking his head.

“Nah, just not worth the effort.”

He takes off with a small smile to Tony, and he turns back to his work — machines. At least *these* he can understand easily enough.

End Notes

So - Tony doesn't actually contemplate killing himself, but he does believe he has to die, and he is okay with that to the point where it could be worrying, but it's not ideation, and Tony doesn't see it as such.

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