

Captain America

A LEGO minifigure of Captain America is shown in a dynamic pose, with his right arm extended forward and his left arm bent. He is wearing his iconic blue, white, and red suit with a white star on the chest. His right leg is bent, and his left leg is extended. He is holding a large, circular shield with a red, white, and blue concentric circle design and a white star in the center. The shield is positioned in front of him, and he appears to be using it to block or deflect an attack. In the background, another LEGO minifigure of Iron Man is visible, wearing his gold and red suit. The scene is set against a dark, textured background, possibly a wall or a floor. The overall composition is dynamic and action-oriented.

THE KANG INFLICTION

BY
LUKE PORTER

2



At first, the courtyard ahead of us is deadly quiet. Then Kang's face appears, at approximately the size of his ego. In a booming voice he tells us to surrender now and we will be locked away, unharmed. If we take one more step, he will destroy the cure, and leave the Earth to rot. He is broadcasting this event on every screen on the planet, so the world can watch us make our choice. One more step, and the world is doomed.



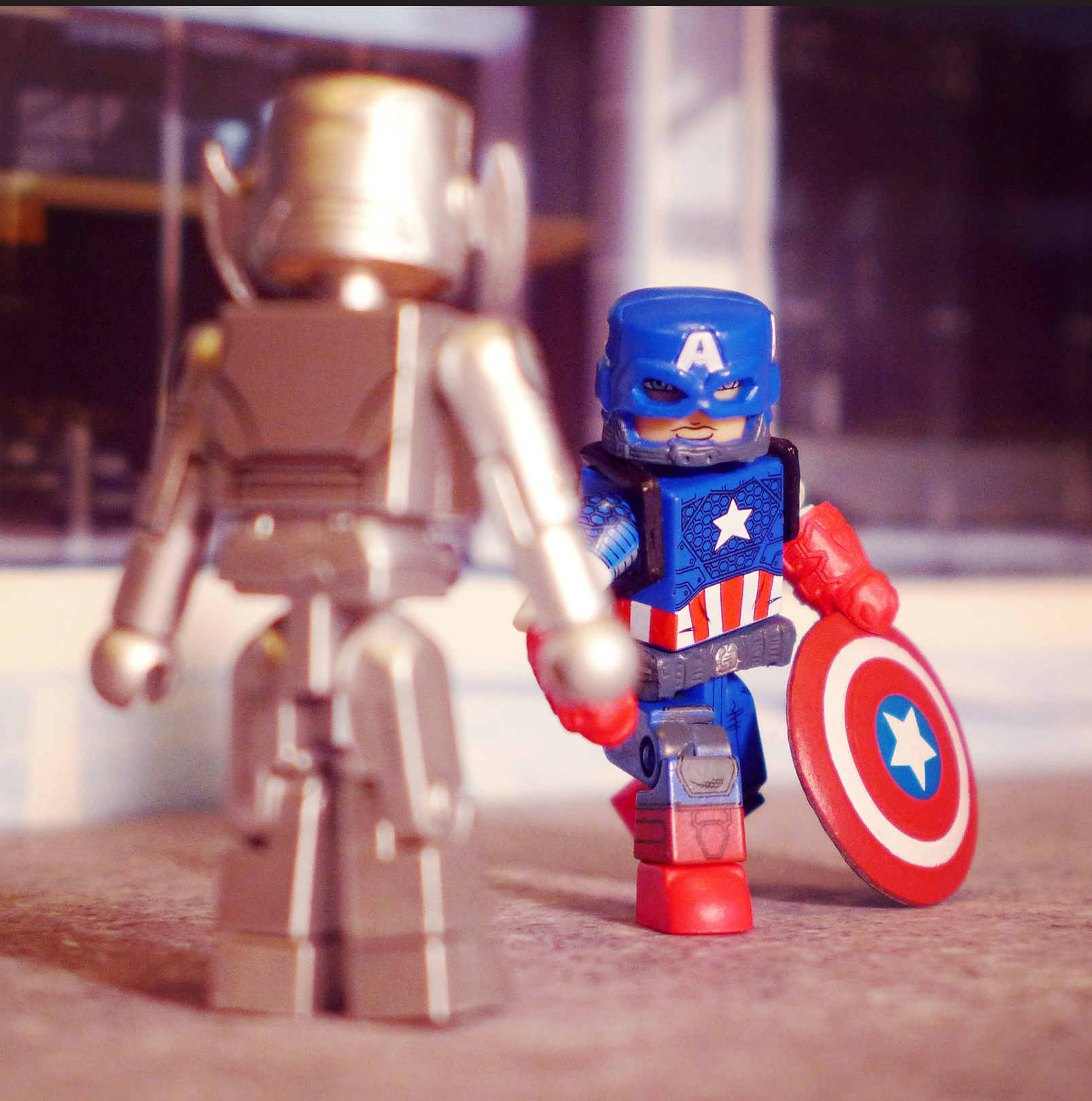
We don't take a step. We take a stride - a long running stride together, straight towards the tower. Kang will not keep the Earth under his boot. We will find another way to survive. Anyways, I don't believe he will destroy the cure - it's his last bargaining chip, and he is going to need it.



I barely have time to react. I drop low and skid along the concrete. T'Challa takes the high road.



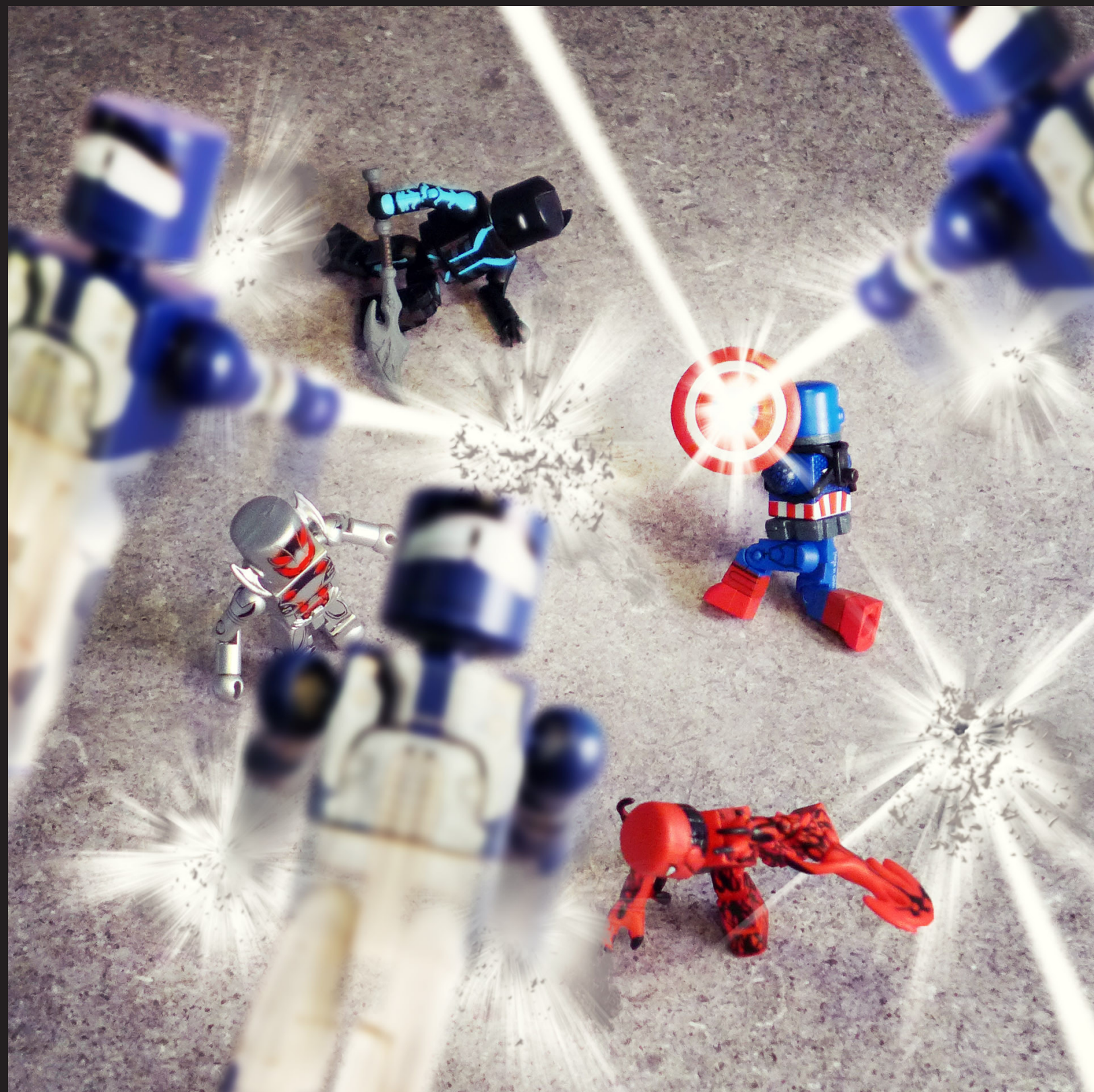
*The others also manage to avoid the first attack,
and the drones bank high for another pass.*



Tony and I exchange a brief telepathic exchange via Emma. Kang was able to reawaken and control the Stark tech in the tower, which the Infliction virus had disabled. So did Kang already cure the virus in these drones? Or does he have a higher level of control over the virus than we thought?



One of the drones gets in range of the Doombot laser batteries and is torn to pieces.



The Iron Legion rains down repulsor blasts on us. I should be able to take two of them down with one shield throw if they line up just right...



*2 seconds later, opportunity comes knocking.
Three drones down. Five to go.*



*One of the drones drops a bit too low, and
Black Panther drives him into the pavement.*



The remaining four drones swing around for another pass, but this time they form up with two drones high and two low. We need to pick off the high flyers first.

Emma has a suggestion from her days with the X-Men. The Fastball Special.



The Iron Legion drones are built strong, but Tony's Ultron armor is made of pure adamantium. He cuts through them like butter.



Meanwhile, Agent Carnage takes care of one of the low flyers.



Vision takes care of the last drone with a lot more grace than the rest of us. He simply reaches inside and removes the drone's control center. It's heart.



I look at the remains of the drones, and I suddenly realize what might be coming next. I ask Tony if he destroyed all of his old armors after he knew that they were infected. His eyes widen and he curses under his breath.



Six armors come out of the tower behind us - not in a reckless charge like the Iron Legion, but with each armor specifically targeting one of us. And if that isn't bad enough, one of them is a Hulkbuster.



*I'm the closest to the tower, so I take the first hit.
This was Tony's newest armor, and it hits me like
a semi-truck.*



Out of the corner of my eye I see the Mark 42 armor targeting Black Panther. T'Challa should be able to handle this one by himself. My biggest worry is the Hulkbuster.



Hulkbuster is unexpectedly fast, and Tony receives a vicious repulsor stomp. His adamantium armor should hold up for a while, but he is going to need help soon.



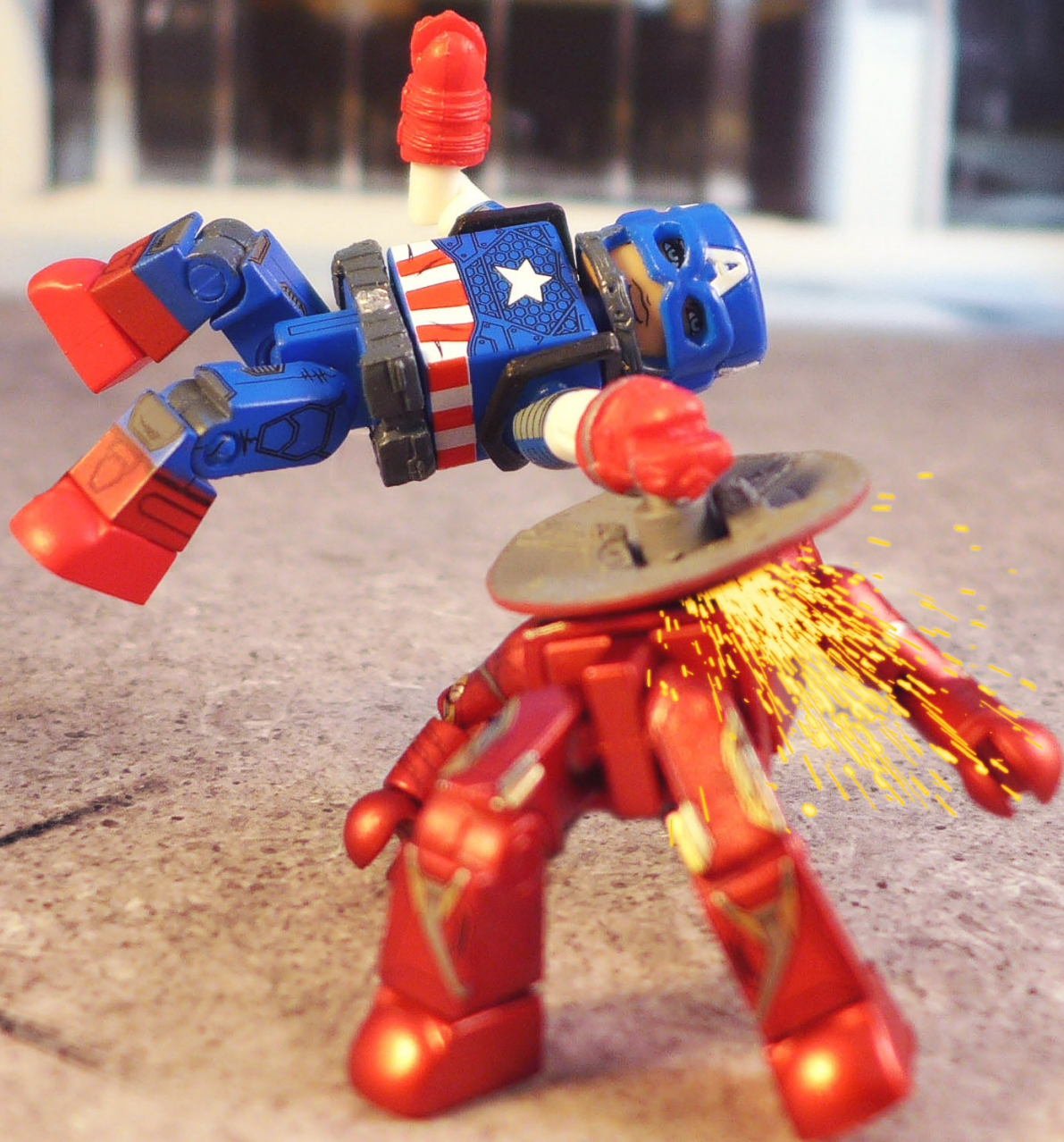
Agent Carnage is fighting a slightly older armor. Flash is making some brutal attacks, and I hope that Emma can keep him in check while she is fighting a battle of her own. Flash probably won't be able to break this armor, but he can keep it occupied for now.



Tony's first armor, the Mark I, is slowly bombarding Emma with different attacks. I don't even know how this antique is able to function as a drone, but now is not the time to ask. This is definitely the slowest armor, which is good because Emma has a lot on her mind.



Vision doesn't even phase as the Stealth Armor hits him. Emma lets us all know why - for some reason, Vision can't see this armor. I don't know if the original Stealth Armor had this function, or if Kang upgraded it, but Vision is fighting blind.



I need to take down this armor so I can help the others. It doesn't help that this battle is bringing back old memories of fighting Tony at different times. Kang is having these armors target us individually for a reason. I need to come up with a new plan.



I go into defensive mode and put the pieces together in my head. Our strengths and positions. Any weaknesses the armors might have. Learning from our past experiences. I see a clear path and I get ready to knock over the first domino.



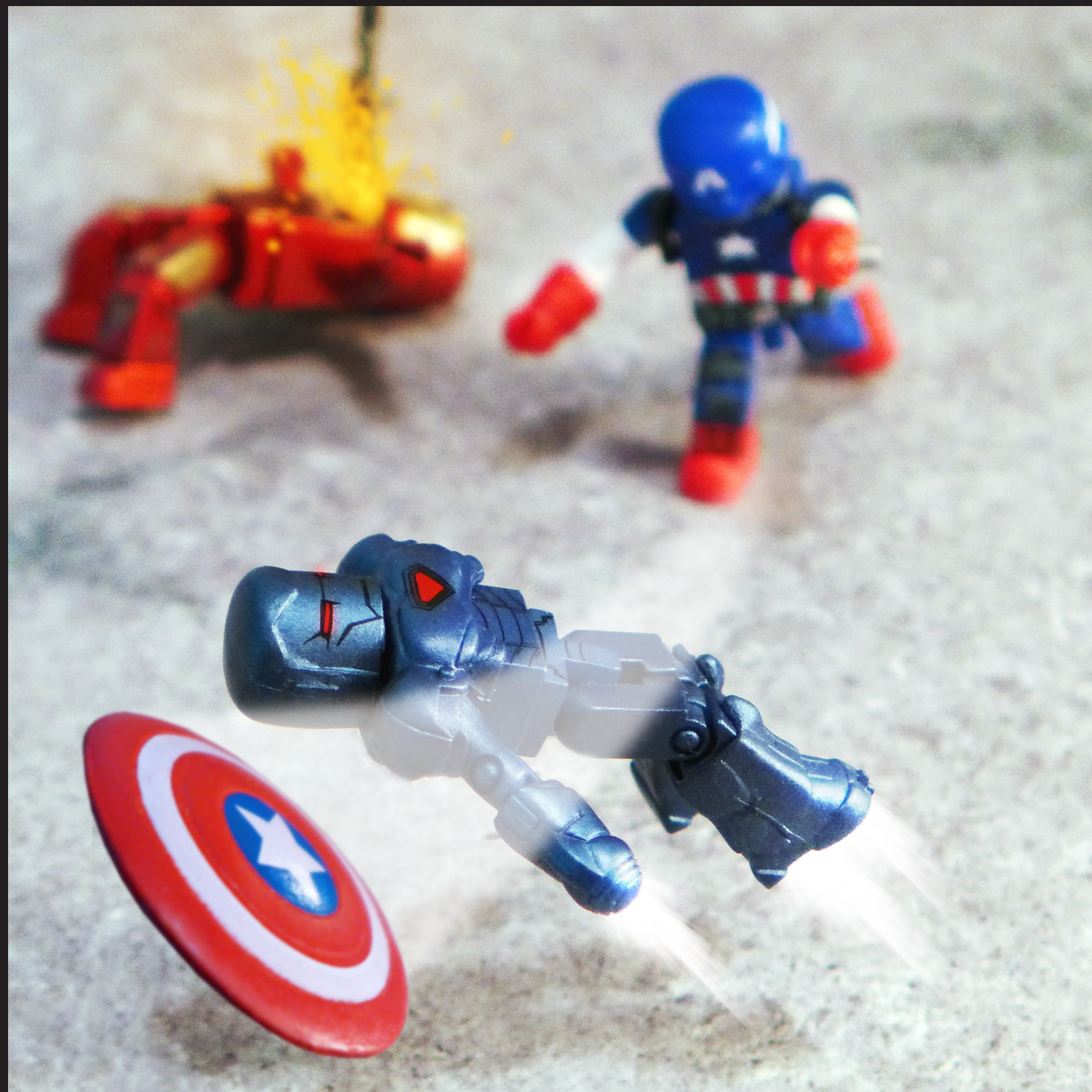
Back in my time, I remember Tony complaining about the neck plates in this armor. He had to scrap them until he had time to fix them. In this drone, that could provide access to the connections between it's "brain" and the rest of the armor. I wait for the right moment, and then I send a message through Emma for T'Challa to throw his sister's ceremonial axe. The effect is exactly what I was hoping for.



Black Panther's assistance leaves him vulnerable, and the Mark 42 separates to try and enclose him - to force us to fight our friend. I've seen this armor do this before, and I was planning on it happening again.



The Mark 42 is weaker when it separates, and I have Vision pick off the pieces before they can complete their mission. The Stealth Armor is still on his tail, but we have a few seconds to spare. I swing around for another shield throw.



*The Stealth Armor dodges my throw,
but it wasn't my target.*



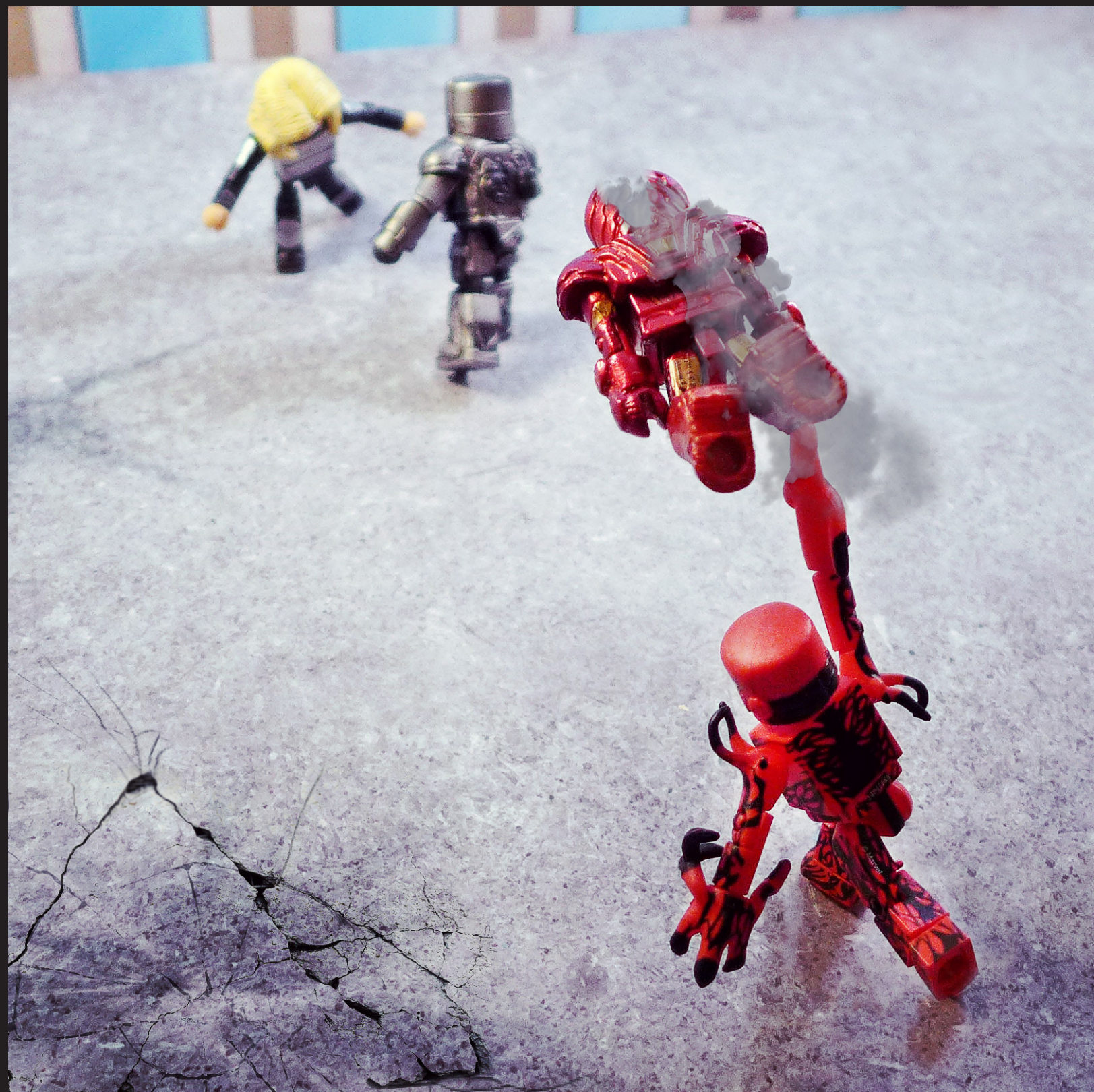
My shield knocks Hulkbuster back a step, and makes him drop Tony, freeing him up for the next part of the plan.



Agent Carnage isn't strong enough to crack his armor's shell, but he can hold it long enough for Tony to take care of business, while I distract the Hulkbuster.



On the other side of the courtyard, T'Challa shows the Vision exactly where the Stealth Armor is.



The last step before we all take on the Hulkbuster is for Flash to use the shell of his armor to smash the ancient Mark 1. Emma makes sure the drone's back is turned.



Most of the Mark 1 armor is destroyed in the impact, along with the remains of the armor that Flash used as a projectile. But what I didn't expect was a sleeker, newer armor hidden underneath the Mark 1...



The new armor takes Emma by surprise before any of us can get to her. As I run towards her, I watch in horror as the armor brings its flame throwers down on her face and body.



Later on, Emma would tell me what I didn't see. A fraction of a second before the flames hit her, she found something deep within herself - something she thought had died with the X-Men - and changed into her diamond form for the first time in eight years.



Emma screams, and throws one of the finest punches I have ever seen.



Another thing I didn't find out until later is that Emma loses her telepathic abilities while she is in diamond mode. This caused Flash to briefly lose control of the Carnage symbiote, although he regained control seconds later. Emma didn't even know it happened. If I had seen that brief glimpse of the monster, I would have made Flash leave the battle. I would have been worried that he would hurt one of us. And I would have been right.



Two seconds before we all realized that Emma was going to be fine, we rushed to her aid instead of taking on the Hulkbuster. The Vision paid for this change in focus with a repulsor blast through his chest.



Vision is still alive, but he lost his ability to phase after that last blast. Tony is racking his brain trying to remember a weakness in this armor. Emma takes a shot at Hulkbuster in her diamond form while Flash holds him back. But this thing was built to take a beating from the Hulk. Even in diamond form, Emma can only scratch the surface.



If Tony doesn't think of a weakness soon, I am considering playing my wildcard hand - the former nemesis that Black Panther and I contacted in the desert. That particular nemesis wouldn't be able to take down the Hulkbuster, but we could certainly use a distraction right now. I decide to hold off a little longer.



Inspiration strikes Tony, and Emma switches back to her normal form to link us all together again telepathically. The first thing Tony tells us is that we're going to need Vision back on his feet again. We have a window of opportunity while the Hulkbuster twirls Flash around like a yo-yo.



This version of the Hulkbuster armor was equipped with anti-gamma nanites that would only target gamma-powered individuals like the Hulk. The nanites are deployed from open ports behind the shoulders. The armor's mainframe is directly underneath those ports. If the Vision can burn through these deployment ports, he can shut the entire armor down.



Suddenly, Vision is torn apart in a cloud of what looks like gray dust - the anti-gamma nanites. These microscopic robots were supposed to only attack gamma-powered individuals, but they have been modified into something much more sinister. Within three seconds Vision is completely vaporized, leaving behind only a brief echo of his last scream. I think about this version of Vision, and how he kept making himself stronger in order to save the world, and my heart sinks.



Tony screams and races towards Hulkbuster. I can feel his rage through the telepathic link. Vision was one of his last friends on this broken world.



Tony picks up where Vision left off. The nanites start tearing apart Tony from the feet on up - but only the Ultron armor. Do they only dissolve metal? Tony's gauntlets are the last thing to be eaten away, but before that can happen, Tony tears into the Hulkbuster's mainframe, and rips out whatever he can.



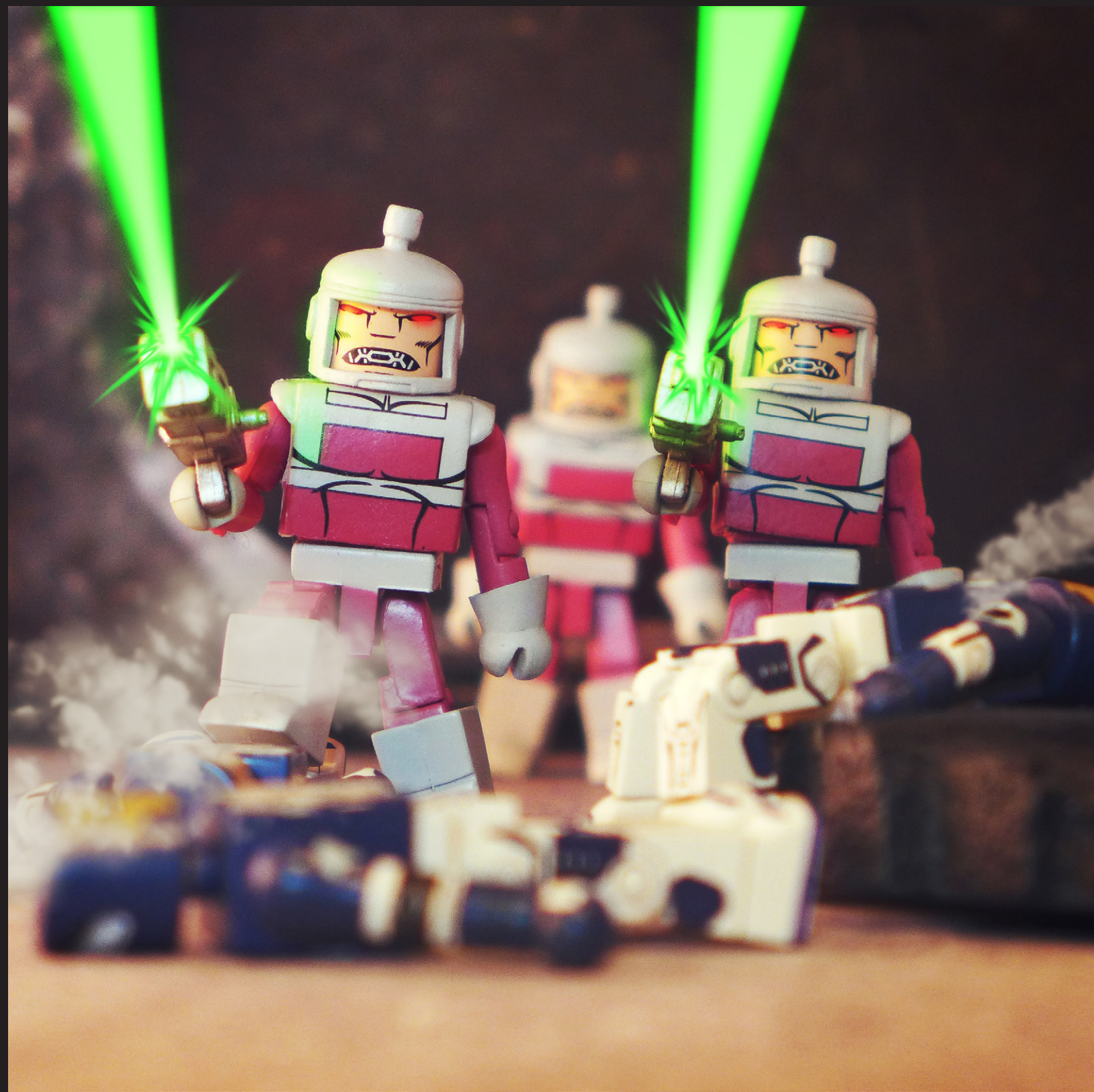
Hulkbuster drops to the ground, and the nanite attack stops. Everything is painfully quiet. No one can find the words to talk about what just happened.



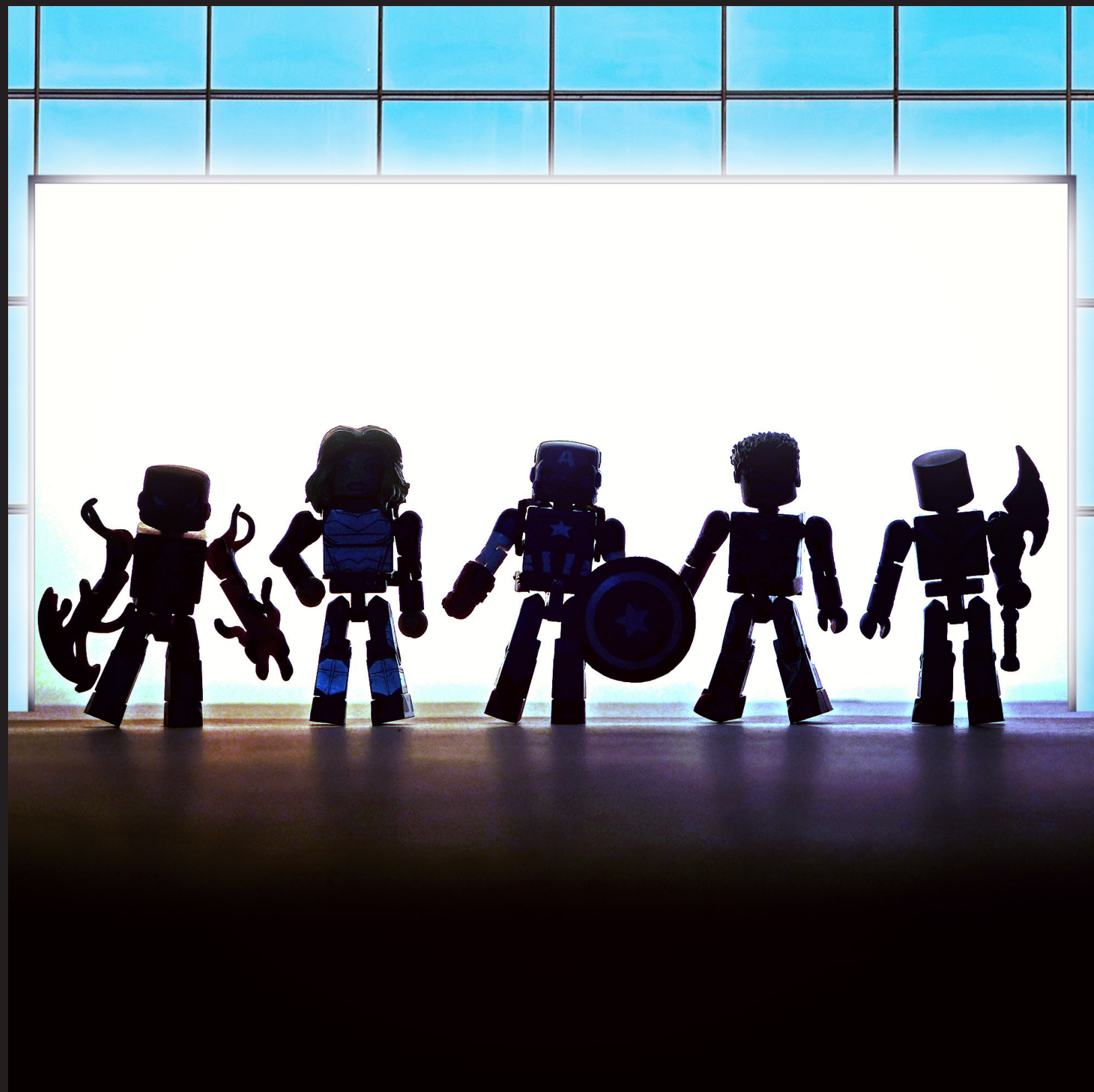
Tony confirms that Vision is truly gone, and there is no way to restore him. All of our thoughts turn to Vision, and we fall silent once again. Emma gathers our thoughts together, and turns them into a telepathic kaleidoscope of memories that we all experience together. This shared state of being only lasts a few seconds, but it is something I will never forget.



Tony puts on the Mark 45 armor, which had its internal connections severed by T'Challa's axe. The repulsors and weapons won't work, and he won't receive any strength assists or any other bells and whistles from the armor. But Tony has some avenging to do, and he wants to do it as Iron Man.



Emma tells us that our Doombots have infiltrated the tower through the basement, and are waiting to assist us inside. I am hoping that Hulkbuster was Kang's biggest play against us, but I have a bad feeling that he has more tricks up his sleeve.



We enter the dark and silent tower. Black Panther grabs his sister's axe on the way in. Emma mentally searches the area, while the rest of us squint in the darkness, looking for traps. Kang is in here somewhere, and we're going to find him.

To be continued...