

Captain America

A LEGO minifigure of Kang the Conqueror, dressed in a purple and green suit with a purple helmet, is shown in a dynamic pose. He is holding a small, circular shield with the Captain America design. In front of him is a smaller LEGO minifigure of Captain America, which is mostly blue and red. The background is a bright green, swirling energy field. The title 'Captain America' is written in a large, stylized, italicized font at the top, with a large Captain America shield logo integrated into the letter 'A'.

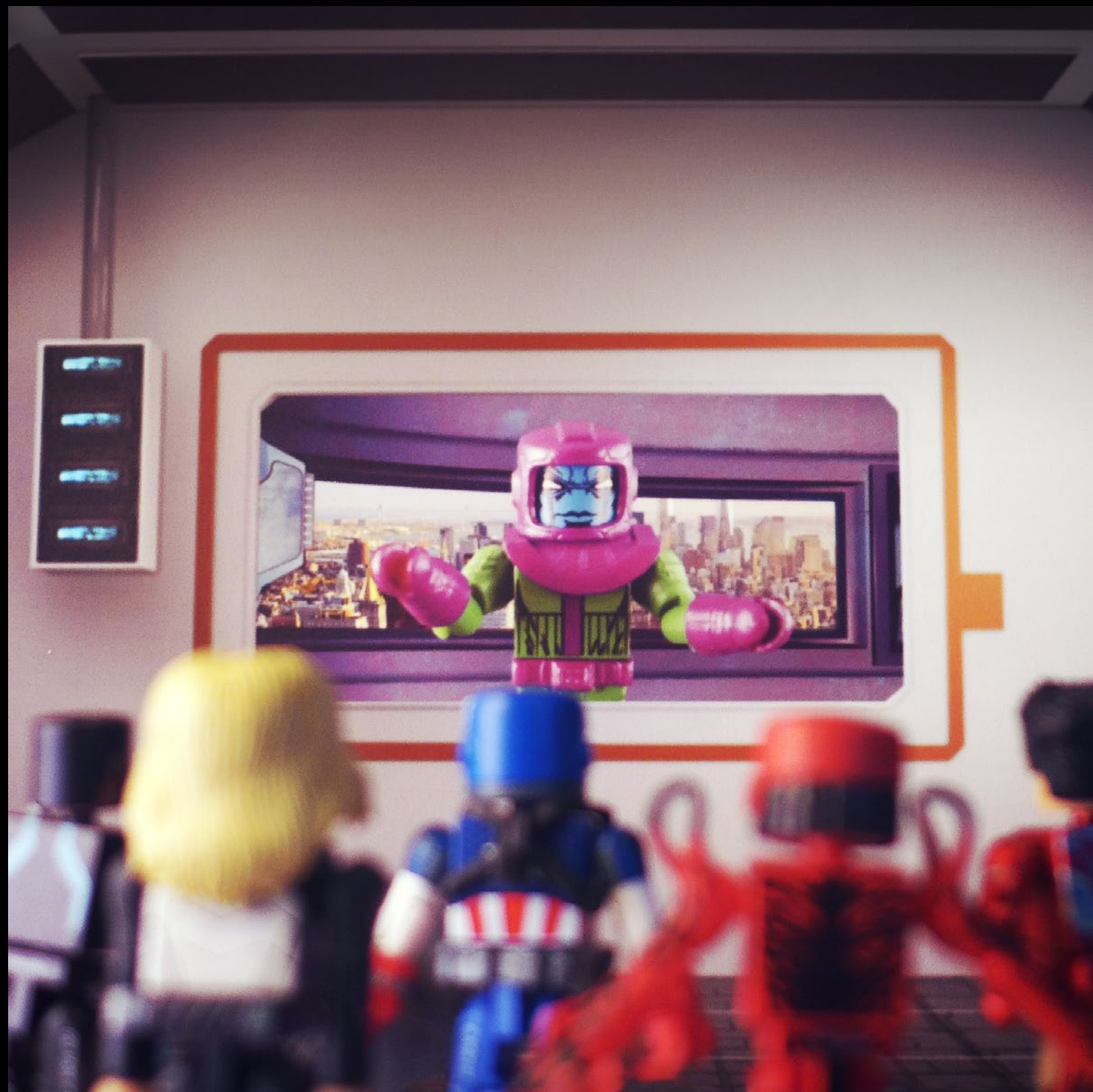
THE KANG INFLICTION

BY
LUKE PORTER

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The lights suddenly turn on, but the tower is still silent. I wish Vision were here. And why didn't Strange show up?



The Doombot army joins us and we move further into the tower. Kang appears on a large screen overhead and commends us on getting this far. He smiles and says it is such a shame that Vision had to die. I feel the anger welling up inside of me.



Kang keeps talking about Vision, and I realize that he is deliberately trying to keep our attention focused on him. I turn around just in time to see our Doombot army raising their guns at us.



Everything moves very quickly. I shout out a warning as the Doombots begin to fire. Emma switches to diamond mode just as a blast hits her on the side of the head. Agent Carnage isn't as lucky, and takes a hard hit in the middle of his back. The sound of the blasts is deafening. And yet through it all, I can hear Kang laughing.



The blasts are endless. I have no window to attack. T'Challa is protecting Flash since his armor can withstand quite a bit of damage. Tony isn't faring as well, and his armor starts to come off in chunks.



Emma tries to charge at the Doombots, but the sheer force of the blasts hold her back. The rest of us try to protect Flash, but he takes another hit to the leg.



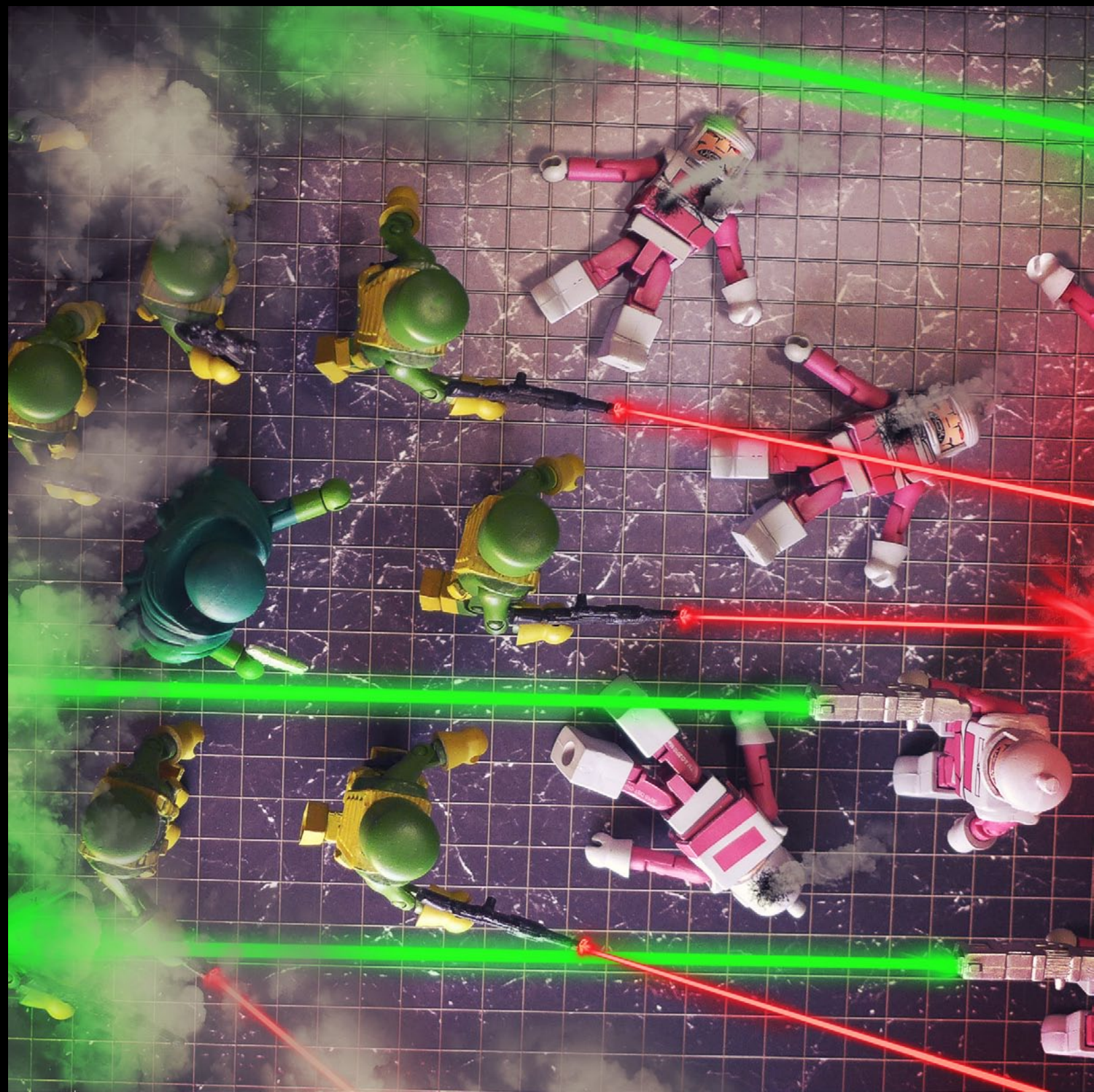
Emma can't keep the symbiote in check while she is in diamond form, and Agent Carnage has taken several blasts from the Doombots. Another blast rips across his arm, and it pushes the symbiote over the edge completely. T'Challa realizes what is happening and tries to hold Flash back, but receives a vicious blow to the head. Carnage is in complete control. And he is insanely angry.



Carnage charges at the Doombot army. Emma switches back to her normal form to try to get Flash back under control, but he is too far gone. Emma gets hit with a stray blast for her efforts. Carnage gets within 10 feet of the Doombots before he is torn apart - both man and symbiote.



T'Challa and Emma are hurt. Flash is dead. Tony's broken armor is nearly gone. I make the call that I didn't want to make. I call the former nemesis that T'Challa and I met with in the desert. I call Hydra.



Hydra's forces, which were in the adjacent building awaiting my call, smash into the Doombots like a tidal wave. Back when the Infliction virus started, Hydra isolated themselves in a massive desert complex and tried to find a cure on their own. No point in taking over the world if the world was going to end. After most of the world's armies fell in the war against Thanos and his invasion force, Hydra became the strongest army in the world. And yet they kept to themselves, training and growing their forces, just in case a day like today would come.



Fighting alongside Hydra turns my stomach. But in this case they are definitely the lesser of two evils. Also I'm going to need them to save T'Challa and Emma.



The Hydra offensive drives the Doombot army back into the courtyard where the fight continues. Their medics take T'Challa and Emma to safety. They are both still conscious. T'Challa asks Tony to carry his sister's ceremonial axe to the final battle. Emma threatens to make all Hydra soldiers believe themselves to be baby ducks if any of us are harmed.



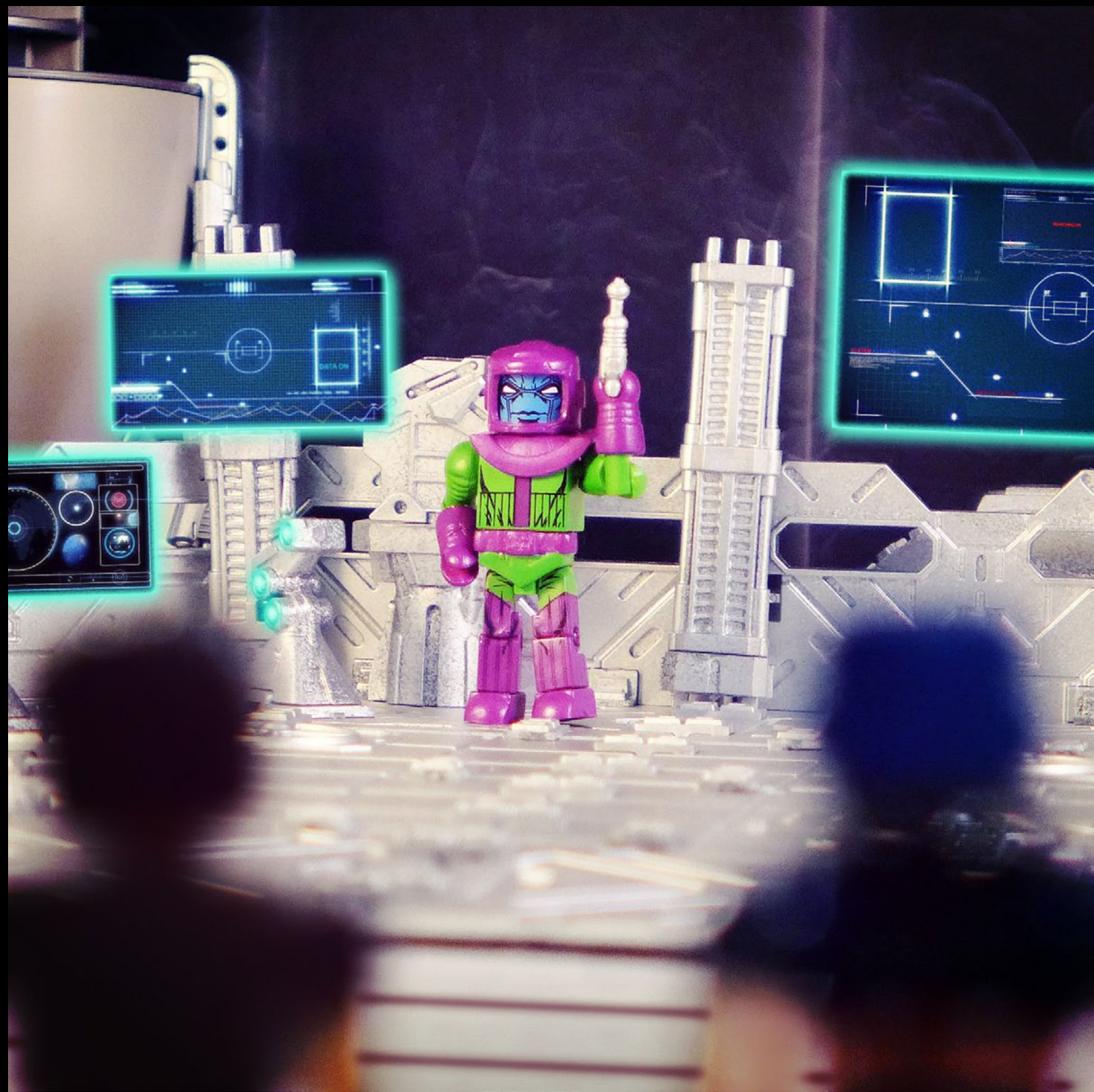
The Hydra soldiers bring a large machine into the lobby. Tony seems to know what it is, and gives me a determined look. They activate the machine, and a stream of blue plasma tears through the lobby ceiling like a surgical laser. It vaporizes the debris instantly. I watch it tear through the next floor, and the next, and I realize what they are doing. Hydra is making a direct route for us to get to Kang.



The Hydra commander hands us each a jetpack, but doesn't say a word. He knows that nothing he says will change how this plays out. Tony and I strap on our packs, and make our way to the top of the tower.



The top floor has even more laboratory space than in my day, probably from the original search for the cure. Sunlight pours in from the hole in the ceiling where the plasma cutter blasted through. We drop our jetpacks and head in.



We walk around the last corner of the lab, and there is Kang, waiting for us. My first instinct is to throw my shield, but that might be exactly what he is expecting. I trust my judgement, and let him talk while I analyze our surroundings.



"Let me remind you that I promised to destroy the cure for my virus if you refused to surrender. And I am a man of my word. You have doomed this world with your actions, Captain. You were never supposed to have gotten this far. I will make sure that changes next time."



Before we can respond or react, Kang destroys the cure with his blaster. Do I believe that was the only physical copy? Yes. Kang sticks to his principles. But I also believe that he remembers the formula.



*This isn't over. We need him to make a new copy of the cure.
I throw my shield, but it hits a forcefield. Kang just laughs.*



He opens a time portal and says, "This world will be mine. I simply need to change the virus to affect Hydra tech as well as Stark tech, and then we'll do this all again. Do you really think this is our first time going through this loop? Time is on my side."



*Tony says, "Time might be on your side, but this is MY tower!"
He jams the ax into a specific place on the wall, which instantly
cuts the power to the lab, the force field, and the time portal.*



Kang screams in anger. As I am rushing to attack, a bright purple flash fills the pitch black room, and I realize that Kang just shot Tony. It looks like he only got hit in the leg, but he is down.



A second later my shield ricochets and connects with Kang. I hit him at the same time from the other side. I hope it hurts. I am worried about Tony, but I need to take Kang down.



The auxiliary power kicks in, and the flash of the lights briefly blinds me. Kang seizes the moment and knocks the wind out of me. His battle armor gives him incredible strength.



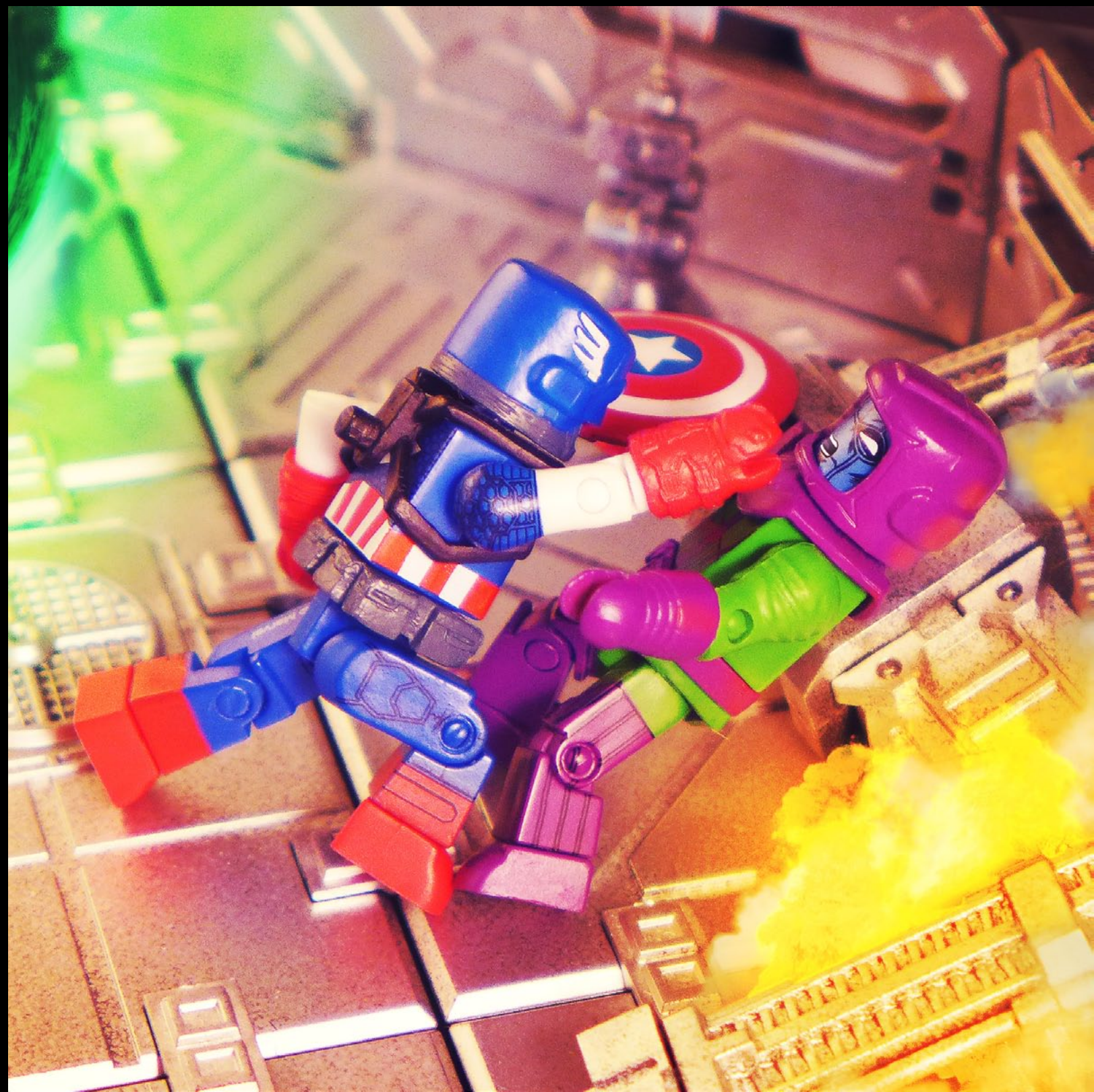
The time portal swirls open again behind us. I get hit hard with my own shield. I let it throw me back, and I build up my momentum.



I launch forward at Kang. My shield will absorb the impact from the front, but it won't protect his back from this.



He recovers very quickly. I always think of Kang as a manipulator and a schemer, but I tend to forget that he is a skilled fighter as well.



*I surprise him with an uppercut, but I don't think it actually hurts him.
His armor is too strong.*



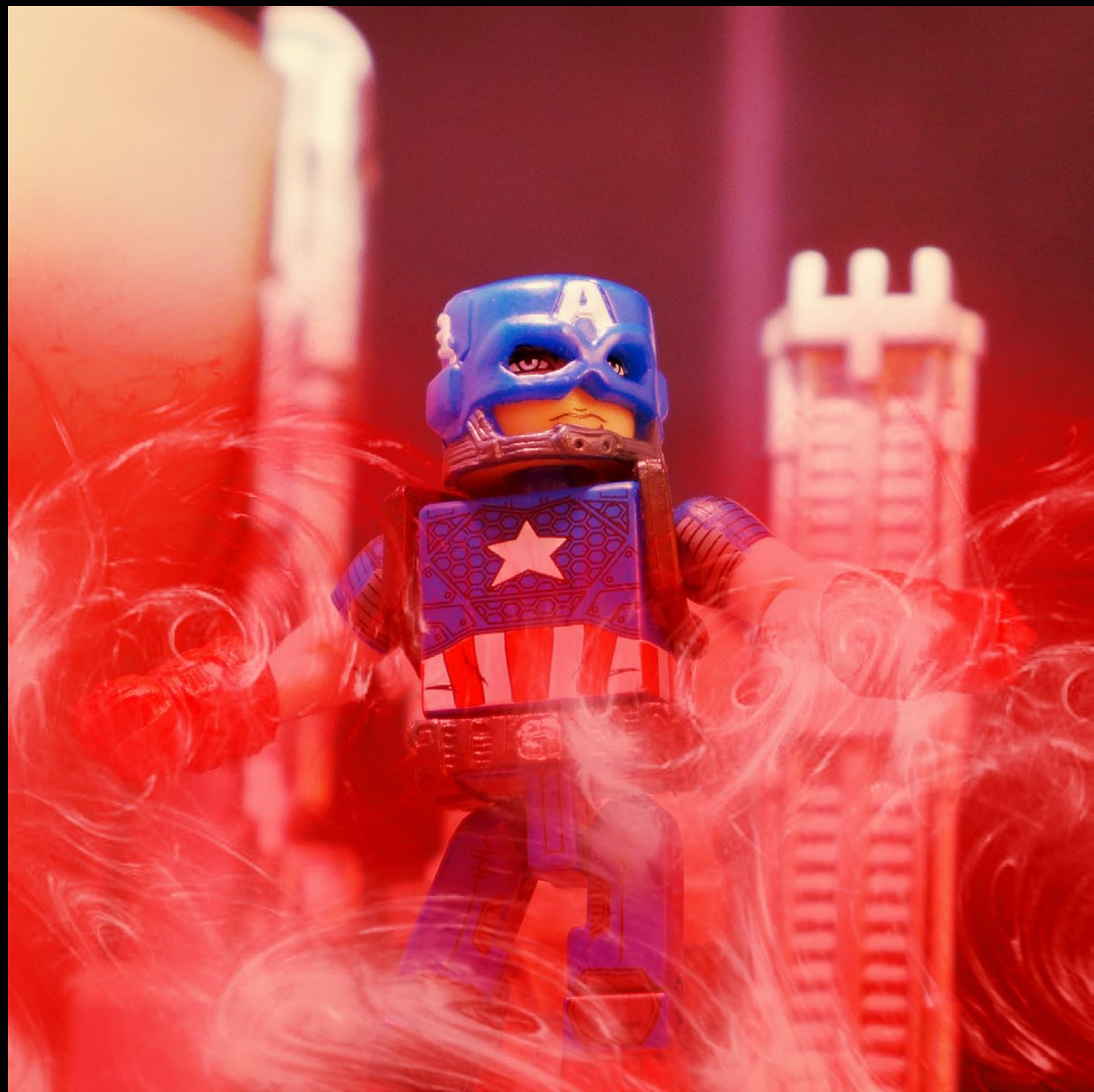
Kang pins me down with my own shield and chokes me with it. He looks at me with a ruthless smile and says, "Next time I'll make sure you watch ALL of your friends die before the end. It's much more satisfying that way."



Kang suddenly convulses and sparks shoot out of his armor. Tony has him on the receiving end of the full capacity of the Avengers Tower power supply. The lights fade, the time portal flickers, and Kang the Conqueror collapses onto the floor with a dull thud.



Kang is alive, but is unable to move at the moment. Tony isn't hurt as badly as I had feared. We take a minute to catch our breath before we decide what to do with Kang.



Red energy suddenly surrounds me, and at first I suspect another trap from Kang. But then I hear the familiar and unsettling sound of a thousand creatures screaming through a dark tunnel, and I know that Dr. Strange is finally here.



The red energy swirls around us in a twisting vortex, and we are instantly transported to Mr. Sinister's laboratory. But why now? Did Strange know that we already beat Kang, or was he trying to save us?



Beast, Mr. Sinister, and Dr. Strange appear ready to fight, but they quickly relax when they see that Kang is immobilized. Beast holds up a memory card and says the words we have been waiting to hear. "We found the cure." I breathe a huge sigh of relief.



I start to ask how they found the cure, but Strange cuts me off, and tells me there is something that needs to be taken care of immediately. Those haunting other-worldly screams start to fill the air again.



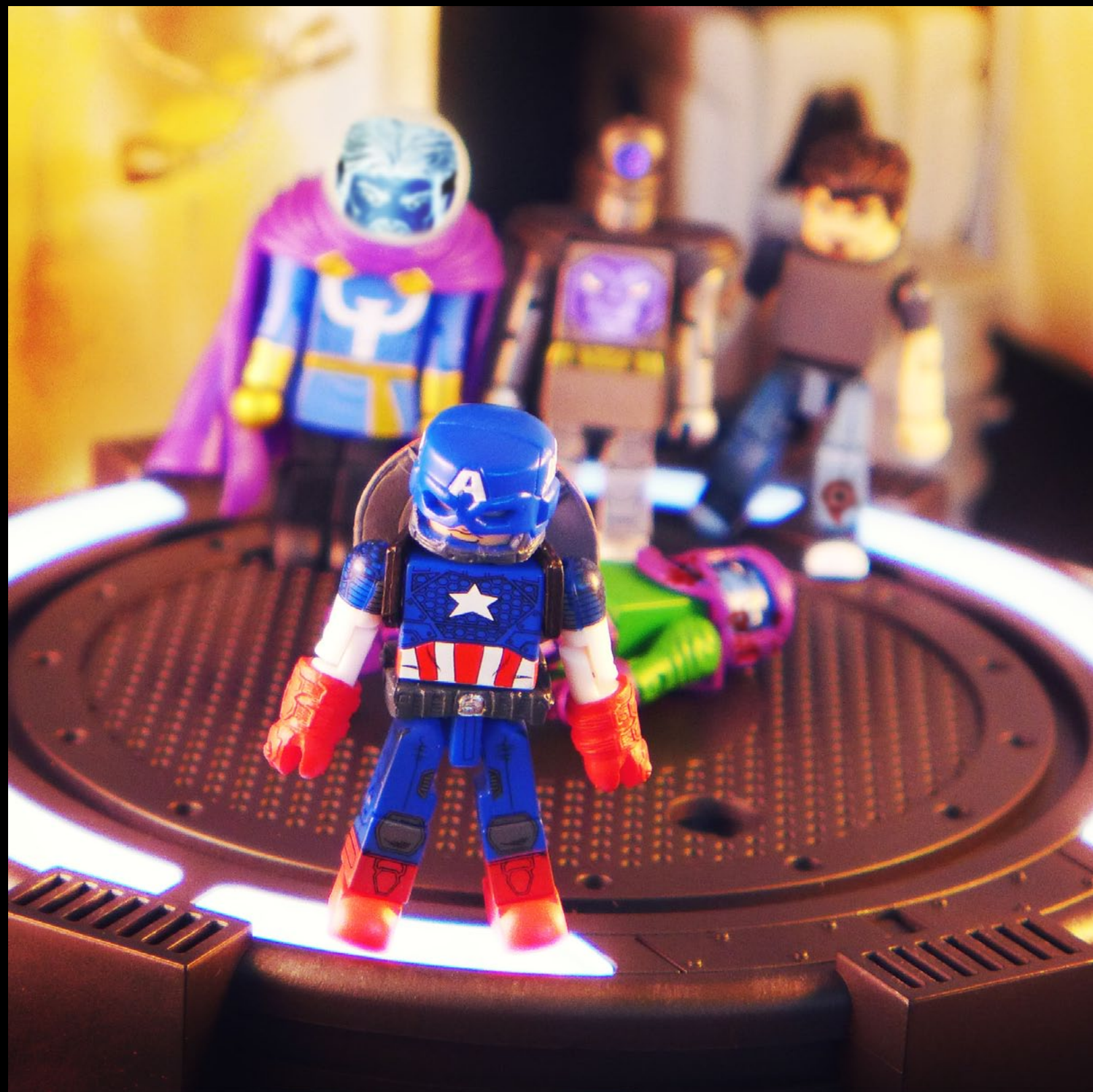
A chasm opens beneath Kang, and tendrils of energy raise him into the air. The tendrils suddenly constrict and begin to crush and distort his body. Kang screams in pain and I hear the sickening snap of bones.



Strange keeps going. This is wrong. I try to stop this torture, but the energy holds me back. I look to Tony and Beast for support, but their faces tell me everything I need to know. They want this.



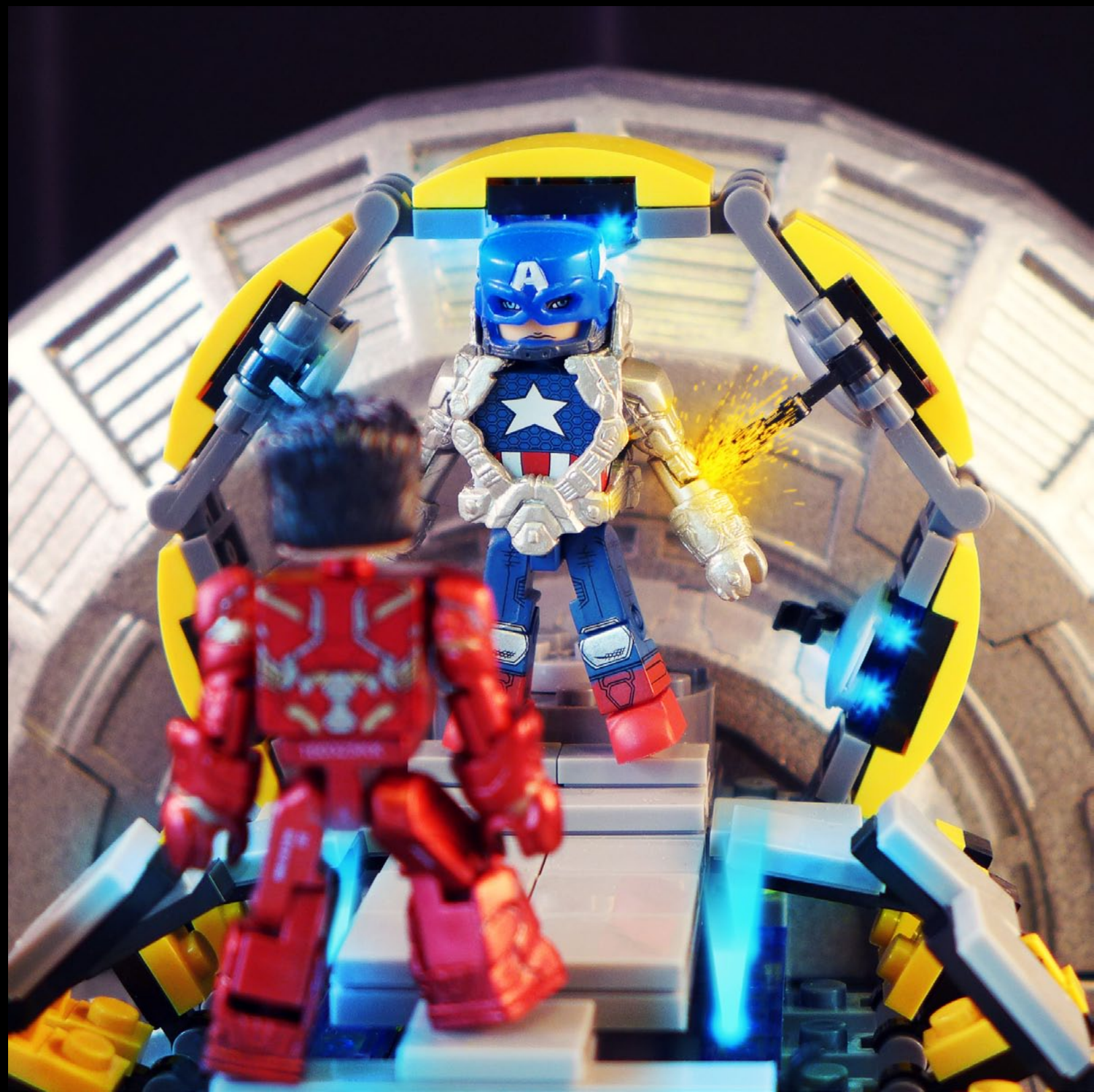
Kang screams until his head is twisted around backwards, and then the screaming stops. Somehow I know that Emma and T'Challa would want this too. After 10 years of suffering on this broken world, this is what the Avengers have become. I feel sick.



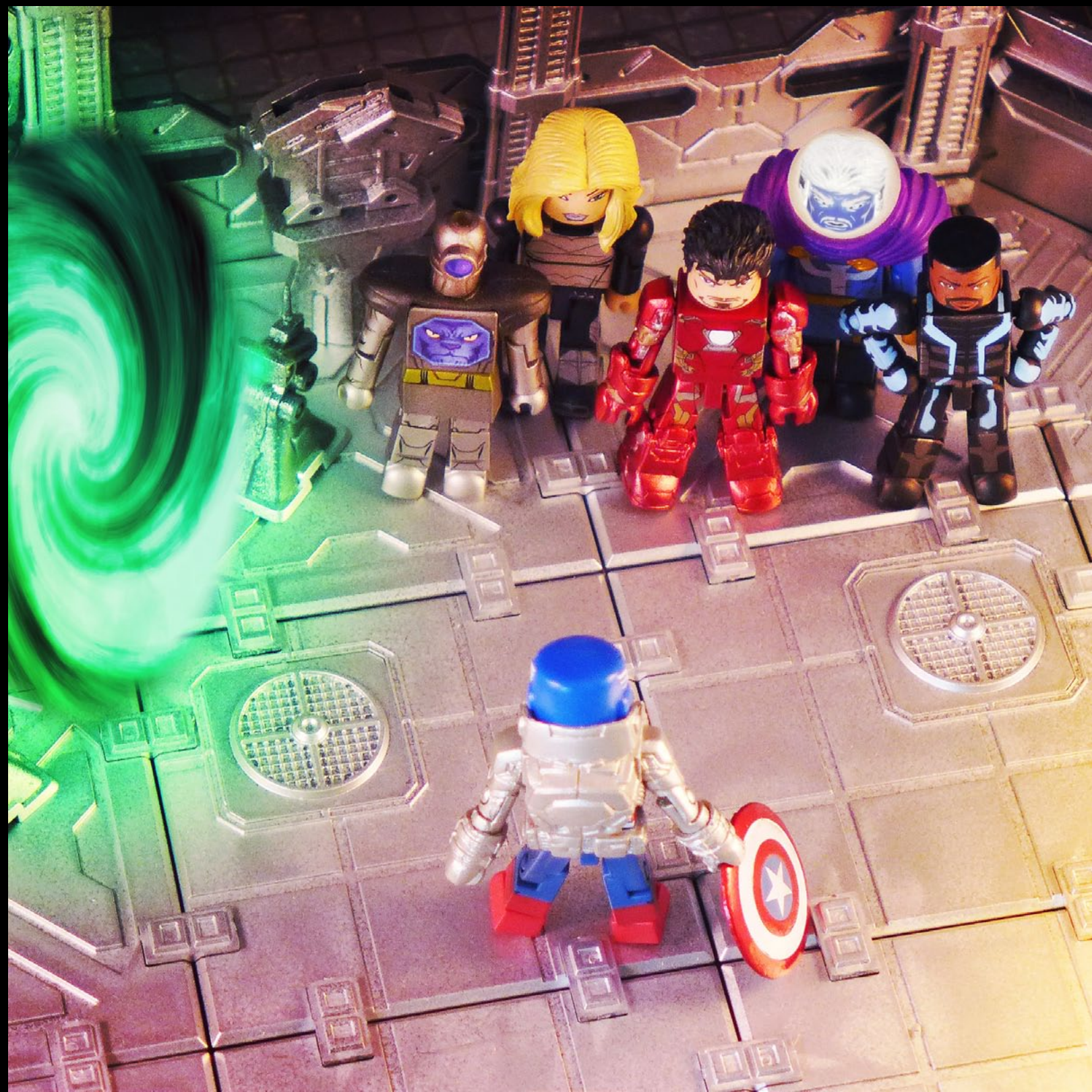
Strange finally stops, and Kang's dead, contorted body falls to the ground. I realize that I can't stay and help rebuild this world. The Avengers just tortured and killed an unarmed person. Yes, Kang was responsible for the death of millions. But the Avengers don't get resolution like this. Never like this.



I tell them that I need to return to my time, in order to make sure the Kang Infliction never happens. These Avengers have the cure, and they can rebuild this dark world without my help. They all express their wishes that I would stay, but I can see in their eyes that there is a gulf between us.



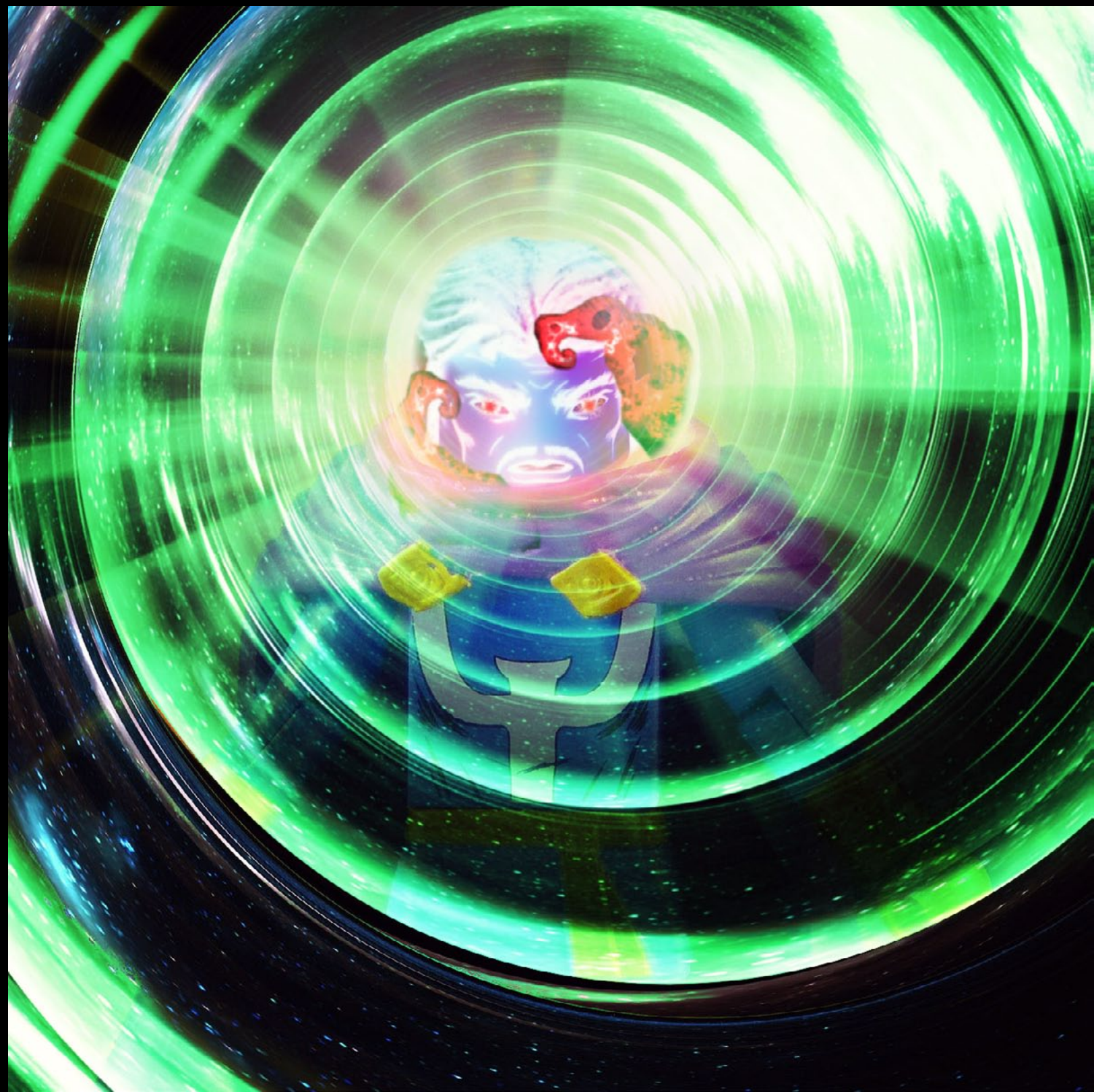
I need to return to my time immediately after my first departure, when I was on a space station orbiting Earth. Beast uses the cure to cleanse Avengers Tower, allowing Tony access to his tech again. His machines quickly rebuild my space armor.



Emma and T'Challa return a few hours later. Beast recalibrates the time portal, and they all vow to destroy it after I leave. They know the dangers and pitfalls of time travel. I hope I can trust them.



*We say our final goodbyes, and I step into the portal,
leaving the Infliction universe behind me.*



As the portal pulls me back through time, I take one last look at the Infliction Avengers. I see Dr. Strange standing in front of the time portal. His eyes are glowing bright red and something grotesque slithers inside of his helmet. He isn't looking at me - he is looking behind me. Into the past. And something about that look worries me...

THE END... FOR NOW!
THE INFLICTION UNIVERSE WILL RETURN!