When Tony Stark finally opens his eyes after being rescued from Siberia, he isn't the same man anymore. What happened in that abandoned Hydra base has broken him in ways that even Afghanistan hadn't.

But Tony is famous for his innate ability to fix things, even himself. Slowly, with the help of friends old and new, he learns to deal with his new status quo, picks up the pieces of his
destroyed existence and rebuilds it from the ground up.

Until an unusual accident puts a new, interesting spin to his already interesting life.

Notes

Hello, everyone! I'm intrigued with the current situation of the MCU in the aftermath of Civil War and I wanted to delve in it myself. This is not my first fic, but it is the first in something like four years and the first I post here, so please be lenient.

See the end of the work for more notes
Awakening

The steady beeping and hissing of the medical equipment was the only thing breaking the silence of the room. In any other occasion it would have been just a suffused, background noise. A typical hospital noise.

Hospital noises were supposed to be easy to tune out. They were supposed to be low and non-threatening. But this time, the noise was almost unbearable.

Because this time, it was the noise of Tony fighting for his life.

The phone call Pepper had received almost three days ago from a distressed Friday was still replaying over and over in her brain: "I've lost the Boss! Mark 46 is offline! Last known location: Siberia-"

Pepper hadn't listened to how the AI had continued. She was pretty sure Friday had given her coordinates, latitude and longitude, followed by a complete chart of Tony's vitals moments before the armor had shut down.

Friday had followed her protocols: as soon as the suit had gone offline, she had contacted Rhodey, Happy, Vision and Pepper. All had received the same call. But there wasn't much Pepper or Happy could do. Or Rhodey, as it turned out.

That was how Pepper had first learned of Rhodey's injuries at Leipzig. He had been hit by friendly fire. While fighting those who were supposed to be his teammates.

While Pepper was still trying to understand what the hell was going on, Vision had mercifully taken matters in his own hands: he had gone to Ross, trying to be authorized for a rescue mission.

And that absolute scumbag had refused.

He said Tony had violated the Accords by entering Siberia without authorization. He had even had the nerve to threaten legal actions against him for his behaviour. Vision had replied rather hotly for his standards: he reminded the Secretary he was the one who had put Tony in that situation. He had given Tony thirty-six hours to apprehend Rogers. Going to Siberia had probably been Iron Man's last ditch effort to get to the Captain before the time was up. Ross had been cowed out of pressing charges, but it was clear that if they wanted to rescue Tony, they were on their own.

Pepper didn't understand how a man could be so callous. Tony's life was on the line; he could already be dead, and Ross just kept on stalling. She didn't know if he was refusing to help out of spite for Tony or out of spite for the Avengers as a whole, or if he was trying to make them say 'we'll owe you if you help us'. Quite frankly, she didn't care.

She was CEO of the biggest tech company on Earth. Dealing with dirty politics and dirtier politicians was half her job, and she was good at it. Unbelievably good. She ate power hungry fuckers like Ross for breakfast on a daily basis. So she sidestepped him entirely and brought the question directly to the Accords Committee at the United Nations. The rescue mission had been approved in less than two hours. Almost a record, but it had still been time-consuming. At this point, Tony had already been missing for more than nineteen hours.

And it had been exactly twenty-two hours and forty-one minutes since the suit had gone offline, when the rescue party, led by Vision and Pepper herself, had found him.
Tony was lying against a column of that hideous bunker. His armor was utterly destroyed: the helmet laid in pieces not far from him, and a horizontal gash on his chest plate had cut the Arc reactor clean in half. Next to the helmet, about three feet from it, was Captain America's shield, face up and scratched by what looked like claw marks.

Pepper didn't notice any of it.

She ran straight to Tony, falling on her knees right beside him. His face was covered in blood, his eyes closed and his head bowed uselessly to the side like a broken puppet. *My God, what happened here?*

That had been how they had ended up in this limbo. Back at the Compound, with Tony unconscious in a bed of the infirmary and hooked up to all sorts of machines. Machines that were making that incredibly obnoxious noise.

It was supposed to be easier if they weren't together. It was supposed not to hurt as much to see Tony like this. Instead here they were. That noise was still grating annoyingly at Pepper's ears. She thought she might go crazy.

Friday's announcement came almost as a godsend: "Miss Potts, Doctor Cho is here."

Relief and dread hit her at the same time with equal force: "Thank you, Friday."

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Helen Cho was not good at poker. Her face was as easy to read as an open book. And Pepper had to fight hard to avoid falling apart completely at what she was reading.

"It's bad, Pepper."

*No shit, Sherlock.* "Define 'bad', please."

Helen hesitated. She was avoiding eye contact. Pepper could practically hear the words before they actually came out of her mouth: "I don't think he's gonna make it."

Pepper felt a knot form in her throat, so big it was almost crushing her windpipe and stopping her from breathing. But she had to know. She kept her eyes on Helen, willing, almost daring her to look her in the eye and continue. In the end, Helen did:

"Whatever hit disabled the suit also caused an extended blunt force trauma to his chest. Five broken ribs, three right and two left. The right lung collapsed in the process..."

'Whatever hit disabled the suit'. Yeah, right, Helen hadn't been there. She hadn't seen the cut on the chest plate that was a perfect match to that vibranium shield laying five feet from Tony.

"His heart apparently has also sustained some damage, and you know what that means. It was already weakened to start with, what with all the surgeries he's undergone, the palladium poisoning and the shrapnel."

Pepper wanted to scream.

"There are also all the hits to his head. He had a major concussion that led to a cerebral edema. And then the frostbite. His toes and fingers were somehow protected by the suit, but his head was completely exposed."
"So there's nothing that can be done?" Pepper interrupted. She couldn't stand that damage report anymore.

Again, Helen hesitated: "Not with the standard procedures."

This time, Pepper hesitated too: "Extremis" she whispered.

"It's pretty much our only option" concluded Helen with finality in her voice.

Extremis as it was first conceived seemed like something straight out of hell. People blew up with the force of a ballistic missile. But Tony was never one to back down from a challenge.

He had found the way to stabilize the serum when he had cured her. He just wanted to remove it from her body, but somehow he had ended up with a fully functioning super soldier serum that was possibly even superior to Erskine's. After all, he had said it himself: he fixed stuff.

"What would happen to him if we go down that road?" Pepper asked, tired.

Helen, on the other hand, seemed to have gotten some enthusiasm back: "He's not going to blow up in flames, if that's what you're worried about. He's managed to fix all those side effects completely. But he will be... different."

Pepper didn't like where this was going. She knew Tony wouldn't like it either: "So super strength? Speed?"

"In all probability" Helen explained. "You've had Extremis almost completely removed from your system, it's so diluted in you that it's been rendered completely inert. But in Tony's case, we will have to use a much higher concentration if we want to save him. So yes, he's going to be stronger and faster. He's not going to be able to melt things or breathe fire the way Killian and his goons did, and tissue regeneration will be significantly curtailed too. It would probably take him a week to regrow a pinky finger whereas Killian was able to regrow an entire forearm in seconds. But yes, he will most likely be able to give Steve Rogers a run for his money even out of the suit."

Pepper smiled tiredly: "Tony has never wanted this kind of power," she said, shaking her head, "he used the lowest Extremis concentration possible when he took the reactor out of his chest. Rhodey asked him why, once..."

Helen seemed confused. Pepper continued: "Tony answered he didn't want to be a super soldier. His father wanted him to be like Captain America. Tony didn't want to. Not spiritually and not physically."

Helen leaned forward and took one of Pepper's hands in her own: "I understand that. Really, I do. But it's not about Howard anymore, and it's not even about Rogers. This is Tony's life we're talking about."

Pepper collected herself: "how long does he have?"

"Hard to say. A week, probably. Two, at most."

"My God..." Pepper whispered, bowing her head.

"It's your call, Pepper. Tony made it so. He trusts you to take this decision for him in case he can't. I'm just telling you our options."

She knew that. She also knew Tony wouldn't like it. He had fought all his life, not to be influenced
by Howard first and Steve after. Howard had wanted his son to be good, compassionate, restrained, with an impeccable moral compass and sense of honor. Not just like Captain America, but his spitting image.

Tony hadn't disagreed with those values, he had just wanted to choose his own path.

He didn't want to be like Captain America. He wanted to be his own person. And that meant he also didn't want to be just another super soldier.

But now, the alternative was simply unacceptable.

"Do it" Pepper said. Then she stood up and left, never looking back.

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She was back with him, when the last of the five injections was being administered. Helen herself had been the one injecting the serum. Now Tony was hooked up to a bag containing an orange liquid, labeled 'Extr. V-4'. It wasn't fiery and glowing like the original. It could almost pass for plasma or vitamins.

She took his hand in hers: "I'm sorry, Tony. I'm so sorry we have to do this to you..."

She knew this wasn't how Tony would have wanted to be saved. For a moment, she wondered if she wasn't just being selfish, if she was just forcing Tony to live not because he wanted to, but because she didn't want him to die. She just didn't know.

She knew what had happened in Siberia, however.

In that bunker, they hadn't just found Tony. They had also found five dead bodies, each contained in a cryo-chamber, and tons of documents and videos.

One specific VHS had been in a record player in the same room of the cryo-chambers. It was labeled December 16, 1991.

Pepper had thrown up after seeing that video. If Tony had seen it too, it was obvious what had happened next. Of course, Friday had confirmed it.

She couldn't wrap her head around it. How was it possible? How could Steve do that to Tony, after all Tony had done for him?

Captain America was supposed to be the paragon of virtue, truth and justice. Instead, he had used Tony, belittled him, blamed him for things out of his control, and then he had had the nerve to lie to his face about something so important. Not satisfied, he had beaten Tony within an inch of his life and left him to die in that hellish place.

Tony thought of Steve as a friend.

Howard had thought of Steve as a friend.

She couldn't even begin to understand, but she knew one thing: she hated Steve Rogers. She hated him with every fiber of her being.

And now she also understood why Tony abhorred the idea of being like him. Which brought her back to the original problem: was it right to force Extremis on Tony?

Maybe not, but the circumstances had left her no choice. Extremis was not how Tony would have
wanted to be saved... but he would have wanted to be saved. They had gone over this after the palladium poisoning: Tony had never been suicidal, even though he hadn't really cared how long he would have survived after accepting that the palladium in the reactor was slowly killing him.

She kissed his forehead: "Rest, Tony. You're safe now. I got you." Then she kissed him again, stood up and settled herself on the bed next to him.

She was just about to fall asleep when she saw his eyes open.

They were glowing orange.
Start over

Chapter Summary

Tony deals with Extremis. Him and Pepper have a talk and Rhodey starts his own recovery.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's a bit short. Chapter 3 will be longer. However... Pepperony fans, here's your fix-it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony was going to make a full recovery.

Helen was monitoring him, she said things were going even better than expected. His ribs were still a bit sore, but his lung capacity had never been better. The concussion was all but gone, his EEG was absolutely normal, and his heart looked like a jet engine. The frostbite was receding in his nose and ears, fighting a losing battle against Extremis' outstanding regeneration properties. In less than a month, it would be completely gone.

Physically, Tony had never been better.

But emotionally, it was something else entirely.

When Pepper had spoken to him after he had first awakened, she had felt like she was talking to a stranger. She had explained they had to inject him with Extremis to save him. He had responded with a simple 'Okay.' It had been two weeks since then. Two weeks in which Tony and Pepper hadn't spoken to each other outside of the odd 'Hi' or 'How are you'. Pepper was starting to think he was avoiding her.

Granted, Tony had been busy: first he and Helen had had to determine how much Extremis had enhanced his body. The simple answer was: a lot.

It was incredible: he was now able to run at about fifty miles an hour for three hours straight and lift 1.1 tons with one hand. All his senses also appeared to be enhanced. It was still an unknown if Extremis had also extended his longevity, but Helen seemed to believe so.

But he had gone through all the tests with his head bowed down, never looking anyone in the eye, only answering to Helen's questions with monosyllables and a subdued tone.

Then, he had notified the Accords Committee of his enhancements. The meeting had been painstakingly long, it had lasted for more than four hours. Ross, ever the maniac who only saw weapons everywhere he looked, had tried to force Tony to give them blood samples and to let them (or rather, him) run their own tests. Tony had adamantly refused. He told them they could have a look at Doctor Cho's data if they really wanted to, but he wasn't about to let them suck his blood like
vampires. Ross had insisted, no surprise there, but the rest of the Committee had entirely agreed with Tony.

"The Accords are about the registration and employment of enhanced individuals", the German representative, Kurt Leutjens, had said, "They are not about human experimentation to see what made them enhanced." Outvoted, Ross had left the room seething with rage when the meeting was adjourned.

Now, Tony was back, and he was about to throw himself on the next challenge: Rhodey's legs.

The Colonel was already out of hospital, but that wasn't really good news: he was paralyzed from the waist down.

Tony and Helen had immediately proposed him Extremis. If it had worked on Tony, it would also work on Rhodey.

"Your life is not in danger like Tony's was, so we have two options with you," Helen had said once Rhodey had agreed to the use of the serum: "we can have the same procedure we had with Tony and give you a series of high concentration injections. That would heal your legs in a very short time, and also enhance you in a way similar to Tony's."

Rhodey listened very carefully: "Okay... and the other option?"

"We use a lower concentration, similar to what Pepper has in her own veins right now. It won't make you stronger, so you would be spared all the Accords-related paperwork Tony has had to go through" Helen joked, but her attempt at levity fell completely flat. Tony, sitting between Rhodey and Pepper, bowed his head almost in shame.

Helen decided to continue: "In this case, however, healing will take much longer. And it will take a lot of physiotherapy."

Rhodey considered his alternatives for a good few minutes. In the end, he had made up his mind: "You know... that thing kinda scares me." Only Pepper noticed Tony's small flinch when Rhodey said that. "I'm willing to go through therapy. I don't think I should gain superpowers just for the heck of it" he continued. Then, realizing how his word could be taken, he looked at Tony and added: "I mean, your life was on the line Tony, you had no other choice. I, on the other hand... no offense.

"None taken," said Tony, trying to smile. Everyone noticed how much he had to struggle to do it: "it actually feels really good, I don't think I've ever felt in such good shape since high school. You don't know what you're missing" he quipped.

Everyone saw through him. Rhodey tried to make him feel at least a bit better: "Well, I'm not writing off the possibility entirely." he said, forcefully keeping his tone light, "I might still want to go your way if I get tired of physio, but... I'm willing to work out for a bit. Let's just keep the full Extremis on the back burner for now. After all, the sidekick shouldn't steal the hero's spotlight" he added, smiling to Tony.

Tony scoffed: "You were never a sidekick, you know that, right?" Pepper heard the unsaid addition: And I was never a hero.

"I know, I just said that to make you feel better" Rhodey said in a light tone, "Besides, when we fight on equal terms I tend to kick your ass, so technically that makes you the sidecick, not me."

"Is that right? And when exactly did you kick my ass on equal terms?"
"Well, I seem to remember a birthday party back at your place in Malibu that led to the birth of War Machine..."

"Okay, not cool. First: I was drunk. Second: I was dying. Third: you were using my tech. And fourth: I let you win."

"Denial, man. It's just a river in Egypt."

All of them were relieved at the playful banter. But when it was over, that awful sulking expression was immediately back on Tony's face.

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Pepper found him in his lab. He was building some sort of metal contraption that looked a bit like the inside frame of the limbs of his armor.

"What is it?" asked Pepper.

"They, um... they are leg braces. To... help Rhodey with physiotherapy. You know, since he's chosen the boring, long way around it." He tried to be flippant, but his voice was low and slightly broken.

Pepper couldn't take it anymore: "Tony," she took one of his hands, "...did I do a bad thing to agree to treat you with Extremis? Did I make a mistake?"

He looked her in the eye for the first time in what felt like an eternity. Then he smiled that sad, defeated smile that seemed to be all he was capable of these days and looked back to his work: "Don't be ridiculous, Pep. I would have been offended if you had just left me to die."

If you had just abandoned me too, Pepper heard.

Tony took a deep breath before he continued: "It's just... it feels like I couldn't avoid it, you know? It feels like every time I try to stop, to be just a regular guy again... the world just doesn't let me. I tried destroying all my suits, and Hydra came out of nowhere. I tried with Ultron, and we know how well that worked. I tried with the Accords... and..."

He wasn't able to finish. Tears started running down his cheeks before a choked sob erupted from his throat. Pepper couldn't resist anymore. She hugged him and held him tight. God, how she had missed hugging him.

"I was wrong" she muttered. Tony distanced himself slightly to look at her, confusion in his eyes.

"I was wrong to ask you to stop. I was scared that one day you would suit up for battle and never come back. I tried to make you stop but you are Iron Man. You will always be Iron Man, and I can't make you not be. It was wrong to ask that of you."

She brushed away his tears with her thumb: "I was scared and selfish. I thought distance would help me cope if you ever... but when I got that call from Friday... when I saw you lying there in that bunker I just understood how stupid I had been. Can you forgive me?"

"F-forgive you?"

"Yes. Forgive me. I'm so sorry Tony. I'm so sorry I hurt you. I left you right when you needed me the most, and I'll never forgive myself for that."
Tony was stunned speechless. Pepper kissed his forehead. She was scared to ask him the next question, but she had to: "I will understand if you don't want to, but... will you take me back? I want to be with you, Tony. For as long as you'll have me. Please?"

It took him a while to get his bearings. And a bit more to come up with something snarky to say: "Well, if I have to" he said.

They both smiled before they kissed.

"You know, when I woke up and I saw your face... I can't tell you the joy I felt. If I'm getting back up this time it's only thanks to you. I owe you so much, Pepper." Tony whispered hugging her again.

"I love you, Tony."

"I love you too, Pep. So much."

It felt like a huge cloud had just blown away.

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"It's just the first prototype" Tony explained while he was helping Rhodey walk through the parallel bars with the new braces he had built.

"Yeah?" answered the Colonel, leaning heavily against Tony's shoulder.

"Give me some feedback. Anything you think of. Shock absorption... lateral movement... cup holder?"

Despite his current predicament, Rhodey was feeling giddy. It was so good to have at least a hint of the old, snarky, carefree Tony back.

"You might wanna think about some AC down in-" He was cut short when he lost his bearings and fell down. Tony was already trying to help him up: "Let's go. I'll give you a hand."

"No, no. Don't-don't help me" he breathed, struggling to get himself into a sitting position. When he looked up, Tony was back to that guilty, kicked-puppy look he absolutely despised.

It wasn't Tony's fault that he was like this. This had to stop.

"A hundred and thirty-eight" he blurted.

Tony gave him a questioning look.

"A hundred and thirty-eight combat missions. That's how many I flew, Tony. Everyone of 'em could have been my last, but I flew 'em. 'Cause the fight needed to be fought."

Tony was still looking at him, not daring to open his mouth.

"It's the same with these Accords. I signed because it was the right thing to do. And yeah, this sucks, this is... this is a bad beat. But it hasn't changed my mind."

Finally, Tony was almost smiling. It was only slightly better than the usual defeated smile, but it was better. That had to count for something.
"...I don't think" he finished, smiling back.

This time when Tony offered him a hand up, he didn't hesitate.

Tony hoisted Rhodey up. "You okay?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah" was Rhodey's breathless response.

That's when they heard someone knock on the glass doors. Outside stood an older fellow in shades and a FedEx uniform.

"Are you Tony... S... Stank?"

Chapter End Notes

...And here comes the letter. How will Tony react to Steve's... explanation (because that's clearly not an apology)? Find out in the next chapter!
The letter

Chapter Summary

Tony receives Steve's not-apology. He's not impressed.

Chapter Notes

Well, here you have it. That dreaded letter. I chose to write it down in its entirety for your reading pleasure and so everybody can feel the hypocrisy of Steve's words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony,

I'm glad you're back at the Compound. I don't like the idea of you rattling around a mansion by yourself.

We all need family. The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine. I've been on my own since I was eighteen. I never really fit in anywhere, even in the Army. My faith's in people, I guess. Individuals. And I'm happy to say that for the most part, they haven't let me down. Which is why I can't let them down either.

Locks can be replaced, but maybe they shouldn't. I know I hurt you, Tony. I guess I thought, by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but... I can see now that I was really sparing myself. And I'm sorry. Hopefully one day you can understand.

I wish we agreed on the Accords, I really do. I know you're doing what you believe in, and that's all any of us can do. That's all any of us should.

So no matter what, I promise you: If you need us - if you need me, I'll be there.

Tony was livid.

How dare you...

His eyes were glowing ominously with an Extremis fueled rage and his hands were trembling.

HOW FUCKING DARE YOU!!

The paper around his finger was slowly going black. Then it caught fire.

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Vision was still sitting in the main living room when he heard the noise. It sounded as if a tornado was blowing the roof off the building.

He rushed to the offices. Colonel Rhodes and Miss Potts were already there, standing behind a
closed door. Both appeared frightened.

"Vision" Rhodey greeted. Seeing him in that wheelchair made him flinch.

The noise stopped as abruptly as it had started. Miss Potts was looking at the door with a worried expression: "Tony..." she murmured.

Vision waited a few more seconds. His infrared scanners told him Sir was alright. His heartbeat was pretty high, as were his adrenaline levels, and the temperature inside the room was about two degrees centigrades higher than on the outside.

The looks that the Colonel and Miss Potts were giving him persuaded him to take action.

"Mr. Stark is not hurt" he said simply before phasing through the wall.

The inside of the room was in complete and utter disarray. Furniture was toppled over, broken and bent, the wooden surfaces scorched and burned where Sir had grabbed them in his furious rage.

Sitting on the ground, leaning on the far wall in a position that uncomfortably reminded Vision of how they had found him in Siberia, was Mr. Stark.

His fists were clenched in his lap and he was breathing heavily, his pupils still holding a hint of Extremis orange. In front of him on the floor lay an old looking flip phone.

"Mr. Stark, sir?" he called.

Mr. Stark raised his head and looked at him. Then his gaze shifted to the door: "You can come in, guys. I'm calm now" he said.

Miss Potts and Colonel Rhodes tentatively opened the door and entered. They both glanced around worriedly, taking in the destruction, before slowly approaching Sir.

"The good Captain has deigned to extend me an olive branch by means of this-" he kicked the flip phone away angrily, making it clatter on the floor and bounce harmlessly on the opposite wall "-relic of the Reagan administration that he no doubt thinks can't be traced when I could actually trace it with my eyes closed, and a rather touching apology letter that sadly hasn't survived my new Extremis-related status. It's a shame really, I would have loved to hear your opinions about it."

Vision had full access to Jarvis' memory, so he wasn't surprised by the sheer amount of sarcasm exuding from Mr. Stark's words even in his current state of mind.

"Let me give you a quick sum up," Mr. Stark continued, "he said he was glad I'm alive and well, though obviously he refrained to get bogged down in who left who for dead in the middle of God-Knows-Where-Siberia. He then stated how lucky I am to have found a family in the Avengers while he, oh poor guy, was always a lone wolf, not by choice. Considering how many Avengers are with me right now and how many pissed off with him to become fugitives, I'd say he's not very good at math. Oh, and speaking of my family, he proceeded to explain that he decided not to tell me the truth about how his old pal brutally murdered my parents in cold blood, because he wanted to spare me more unnecessary pain and grief. Such generosity, I am so touched."

It was obvious Mr. Stark was trying with all his might not to have another emotional episode like the one that had destroyed the room. But Vision decided to remain silent and let him vent. Sir had every right to.

"He also summarily illustrated to me his opinion on the Accords, saying he's doing what he thinks is
right and I'm doing what I think is right, and so, alas poor Yorick, we can't find a middle ground. I think he didn't even notice how I tried everything in my power to find said middle ground while he didn't give an inch..."

There was a very long pause before one of them found something to say. It was the Colonel who spoke first:

"Hey, Tony, just leave it. He thinks he can go against the whole world, just let him. He embarked on this ridiculous crusade against one hundred and seventeen nations. He can't possibly hope to win, and he's an absolute fool if he thinks otherwise."

"Rhodey's right," said Miss Potts, "you've done everything you could to save him and his lackeys from their own stupidity. You've done a lot more than they deserved. Just stop. Let it go. Sit down and let the world crush them."

Mr. Stark didn't seem convinced. Before he could answer, however, Friday broke the silence:

"Priority call from Secretary Ross. There's been a breach at the Raft prison."

Mr. Stark bowed his head in a defeated gesture. Vision didn't even need to hack into the Raft security system to know what had happened. The timing of this occurrence made it trivial to guess who had breached the prison and with what purpose in mind. In the end, Vision decided that enough was enough:

"Put him through, Friday" he said in a determined tone. Immediately, the Secretary's fastidious voice rasped through the speakers: "Tony, we have a problem."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Secretary. Mr. Stark is not available at the moment" Vision answered, his own voice full of fake politeness.

"What? Who is this?" Ross demanded.

"It's Vision speaking. As I said, Sir is not available at the moment, and anyway he's not in fighting conditions. His suit is currently not operational."

"He's not in- we had a meeting where he registered his new enhancements five days ago! He is in perfect fighting conditions!" Ross yelled. Vision could almost picture the Secretary's face turning red - and then purple - with anger.

"Maybe so, but without his suit, he can't very well take on escaping fugitives flying over the ocean. His enhancement do not comprise the ability to fly without mechanical assistance. I'll let Mr. Stark know that you called, I'm sure he will make himself available for you as soon as his armour is repaired."

"Wait- you can fly! You-"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary" Vision said before making a hand gesture over his neck while looking at the surveillance camera. Friday took the hint and ended the call.

Mr. Stark was smiling at him: "Thank you" he said simply. Vision nodded.

A moment later, Mr. Stark was back on his feet, pure determination on his face: "I'll be in the lab" he said to no one in particular, before leaving the room.

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Maybe Pepper and Rhodey were right. Maybe he should just sit back and wait for the world, for the public opinion, to take Steve down along with his misfit minions.

But how many innocent people would have to pay before that happened?

No, he needed to be ready. What was it that the Spider-kid had said? 'When you can do the things that I can, but you don't, and then the bad things happen, they happen because of you'.

That was exactly why Iron Man was going to fly again.

"Friday, open a new project file. Label it 'Mark 47' and save it in the Iron Man host server. Import all data and schematics from folder: Mark 46."

"Done, Boss. You already have any ideas on how to improve the suit?"

Tony smiled. He found that he really loved talking science with Friday. It was weird, he had programmed her to be a sort of secretary, but she would be a great addition to the Science Bros:

"Indeed. First things first, increase armor thickness on the chest plate and main reactor housing by fifty per cent."

"Immediately, Boss."

"We also need to work on the power source. Bring up the schematics for the auxiliary reactors."

An incredibly detailed 3D hologram appeared in front of him, showing a miniaturized Arc Reactor. It immediately decomposed itself in an exploded diagram of all the reactor components.

Mark 46 had several of these auxiliary reactors spread all around the body. They were about an inch in diameter and in theory, they could significantly increase the suit's power output.

However, Mark 46 was just a prototype. Its auxiliaries only stored energy from the power coupling for the repulsors; they were only allowing faster charging and increased rate of fire. When dear old Steve-O had crushed the main reactor, the auxiliaries had gone offline too in a matter of minutes.

But if he could make them fully independent so they could keep working even in case the main power source was cut off it would not only make the suit more powerful, but also avoid a repetition of Siberia.

And also...

"Friday, you think we could find a way to supercharge the suit with the Extremis in my system?"

"I'm sure we could, Boss. By my estimates, that way you could increase power output by about five hundred per cent."

Tony smiled evilly. For a moment he thought the armor had become almost redundant now that he had Extremis, but Iron Man made him stronger before, and would keep making him stronger even now.

While he was thinking about this, he absentmindedly took a glass of water in his hand, but before he could raise it to his mouth, it shattered in a hundred pieces.

"Damn it!" Tony swore, before looking at his hand. There were a few superficial cuts from the glass, and it freaked him out just a little to see the shards being pushed out of his skin before the cuts began to seal themselves shut.
Friday had apparently detected his distress: "Boss, if I may, you probably should seek some counseling to better acclimate yourself with your new strength before you think about going in the field again..."

No, he didn't: "I'm fine, Friday..."

"Are you sure? I'm not questioning your judgement, but you kind of... destroyed... your office, and now you've shattered a glass 'cause you were not paying attention..."

Tony flinched. Okay, maybe she wasn't entirely wrong. If he lost control in the middle of a fight, somebody could get hurt. But was she suggesting what he thought she was suggesting?

"I'm not calling him, Fri. Ever. I don't need Rogers' advice on how to deal with super strength" he seethed. How could she even think about proposing that to him?

"I wasn't talking about Captain Rogers, Boss. The natural order of the Universe would probably be thrown into disarray if you were ever desperate enough to seek advice from him."

Well, Friday was charming, no doubt about it. But then-

"I was about to suggest you talk with Mr. Parker. I know he's very young and can be slightly hyperverbal on occasion, but he has been dealing with his own enhancements for nearly seven months now, so he has... seven months of experience with super strength more than you do, Boss."

Right, the Spider kid.

Tony was about to protest. He wasn't exactly keen on being schooled by a teenager, but then Romanoff’s comments about his ego reared their head in the back of his mind. And it wasn't such a bad idea, after all...

"You know what, Friday... you might have a point there."

The AI seemed pleased with herself: "Shall I proceed to contact Mr. Parker, Boss?"

What would he do without his baby girl? "Yeah. Yeah, why not, call him."

"Calling: Peter Parker" Friday chirped. Now she didn't just seem pleased, she was also excited for whatever reason.

The phone rang four times before the kid's voice came through the speakers: "Hello? Mr. Stark, is that you?"

Tony smiled fondly at the sound of the kid's voice: "Afternoon, Spiderman. You busy this Sunday?"

"Uh, um... no, not at all..."

"Good. Could you swing by the Compound after lunch? I'd like to hear your two cents on something."

Chapter End Notes

The Extremis armors come from the comics, but I'm not sure if it was ever explained
how they work. I'm not going into too many details (yet), but the point is, they make
Tony a lot stronger.
Progress

Chapter Summary

Tony learns to fight as an enhanced individual, Helen is back, and some news reach Wakanda.

Chapter Notes

Hey, everyone! So, Peter is in this chapter! And also some other people that you may or may not like as much as him. Yeah, it's those guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter was having the time of his life.

That day when he had come home from school to find Tony Stark, the legendary, one and only Tony Stark, sitting on his couch and pretending to like Aunt May's meatloaf, he thought he had to be on Candid Camera or something like that. Five minutes later, when Tony Stark had offered to upgrade his suit, he thought he could die happy. But now?

Now Tony Stark was his sparring partner.

How the heck was complete nobody like him going to the Avengers Compound every Sunday afternoon, to spar with Iron Man himself, helping him through his newfound enhancements? The sun had never shined brighter.

He had to pay attention, though: he couldn't let his fanboy instincts take over even for a nanosecond while on the sparring mats. Mr. Stark was incredibly fast, and even more incredibly strong. Both were pulling their punches, but even so these friendly spars were taxing him almost as much as the fight in Leipzig.

"Boss" Friday called. That distracted Mr Stark right when Peter was swinging a punch. He caught him square in the jaw sending him flat on his rear: "Oh, God! Um... sorry Mr. Stark... I-"

"Don't worry, kid... ouch..." interrupted Tony, gingerly pulling himself up and rubbing his offended jaw: "What is it, Friday?"

"I... Doctor Cho has arrived with her new equipment... sorry for my timing, Boss..." Friday answered, sounding pretty upset. Peter was astonished by the female AI: she seemed completely sentient and perfectly capable of feeling emotions. Mr. Stark truly was a genius, if he had managed to code all that into her program.

"Eh, don't worry guys," Mr. Stark's tone was light and maybe even a bit amused, "that should teach me to keep my guard up at all times." he said, stepping in front of Peter and reaching around him with his left arm.
When Peter instinctively hugged him, Mr. Stark didn't pull back, but he didn't return the gesture either: "It wasn't a hug, Peter, I'm just grabbing my towel" he explained.

Peter's face went red as he immediately withdrew: "Oh. Oh! Um... sorry..."

Tony just smiled at him, grabbing the towel and wiping the sweat off his face: "Well, I have to go. See you next sunday?"

Peter went from embarrassed to fanboying so fast his head was spinning: "Uh- sure! See you next sunday, Mr. Stark!"

***

Freshly showered and dressed in one of his three piece suits, Tony met Helen in the Compound's main hall. She was not impressed with him.

"Happy new year, Tony. What took you so long?" she asked.

"You caught me in the middle of my sunday workout. I could have gotten here sooner, but I reeked like a wet dog. I thought you wouldn't mind if I took a bit of time to doll myself up for you, Helen."

She didn't catch up on Tony's not-so-subtle flirt. Instead, absolute surprise, maybe even shock, appeared on her face: "You? Working out? Has Hell frozen over or something?"

"Funny. Actually it's to get better control with Extremis."

"Really? We should have injected you a long time ago, then..."

"Hey! I worked out even before! A lot!" Tony protested before changing the subject, "Now, are you here for the new Cradle or do you wanna keep trading barbs about my fitness habits? You seemed pretty excited about it when we spoke on the phone..."

"Right. They are unloading as we speak" Helen said, reaching for the door.

Outside, several men dressed in a U-GIN uniform were unloading sophisticated and expensive looking pieces of equipment from a Stark Industries truck and carrying them inside the Compound, some by hand and others using two forklifts for the biggest, heaviest components.

"Express package straight from Seoul" Helen said.

"Uh-huh. You were saying over the phone, about how this new version is better in every way? Did you manage to incorporate Extremis in the end?"

"Damn right I did," Helen was all giddy with excitement: "I've worked it in in the molecular printing process at the lowest concentration to increase tissue regeneration. Wanna take a guess at how much I managed to speed up the treatment this way?"

Tony was surprised she wasn't bouncing on her feet yet. He decided to second her enthusiasm: "Don't know? Ten per cent faster?"

"Ha! Not even close! Sixty-three per cent faster!" she almost yelled.

Tony had to admit she had every right to be excited: "Wow. I'm officially impressed." He really was.

"And that's not everything," she went on, "before, we could just fix lacerations and other, non life-altering wounds. Now, Thanks to Extremis, we can even rebuild amputated limbs! In theory we
could build an entire human body from scratch!"

"See, I knew you were on to something when you first contacted me about this three years ago" he said smiling, meaning every word.

"Well, credit where it's due, we wouldn't be here if you hadn't stabilized Extremis. And believe it or not, I managed to fix some bugs after synthesizing Vision out of vibranium..."

Tony smiled even more: "Who knew something good would actually come out of Ultron's plan."

"Yep. Anyway, I'll start the assembly now. Expect the Cradle to be installed in a couple days tops."

"Alright then, I'll leave you to it." he said, offering Helen his hand. She shook it.

Helen was about to leave when Tony remembered something he really wanted to ask: "Hey Doc, I almost forgot..."

"Yeah?" said Helen turning back to face him.

"When you're done and the Cradle is up and running, do you think it would be possible to test it out on Rhody's spine?" He so desperately wanted to fix his best friend as soon as possible.

"I'm sorry Tony, but I'd rather not. We have already started treating Rhody with Extremis, I don't think it's a good idea to have him undergo a completely different treatment that also involves a similar concentration of Extremis..."

Tony's shoulders hunched: "Right..."

Helen came back to him: "He's going to be okay, Tony," she said, "Rhodes is a fighter. He'll recover completely, I promise you."

***

The caption in bold capital letters next to the reporter read 'Iron Man is back'. The woman was standing outside the main entrance of the Avengers Tower in New York, holding a big, horrid yellow microphone:

"We learned today that billionaire Tony Stark, best known throughout the world for his exploits as the superhero Iron Man, had been grievously injured two months ago in a confrontation related to what the media has dubbed the 'Avengers Civil War', taking place in an abandoned outpost in Siberia. Virginia Potts, CEO of Stark Industries and former PA of Mr. Stark, has spoken to the press today, confirming that Mr. Stark had indeed sustained life-threatening injuries, but is expected to make a full recovery. Ms. Potts also identified the responsible for Mr. Stark's injuries as captain Steven Grant Rogers, better known as Captain America, national war hero and former Avenger gone rogue in the wake of the Sokovia Accords, and sargeant James Buchanan Bar-"

Wanda switched off the TV: "Well, it figures," she scoffed, "he wasn't able to beat us and now he's whining to the press about it."

"Yeah, well, he's not just whining," Clint snarled, "Life-threatening injuries? That's a serious accusation. Potts just painted a huge target on our backs."

"You think he was really hurt that badly?" Sam asked.

"Oh, please, that guy is covered in armor like a turtle in its shell" Scott dismissed him.
Clint was ready to agree: "Yeah. And there's no way Cap would do that to Tony. Even if he deserved it."

"Which he did, by the way," Wanda added, "he was an awful person to begin with but turning on Steve in Siberia? I didn't expect him to sink that low."

Steve couldn't take it anymore. He left the room.

He should have learned from his mistakes. He should have told them the truth.

But when Sam had asked him, he had just said: "Tony came. We fought. It wasn't about the Accords anymore. Look, the other Winter Soldiers are dead and Zemo is in custody, let's just leave it at that, okay? I'd rather not talk about it anymore."

They thought he wouldn't have hurt Tony. They didn't know how he had ripped the helmet clean off his head. They didn't know he was two seconds away from ramming his shield on Tony's throat. But then he saw his face.

The sheer betrayal, the furious rage in Tony's eyes in that moment was going to haunt his nightmares forever. He hadn't even noticed how he had resettled his stance so his shield had hit the reactor instead.

And then he had left. He hadn't bothered looking back. Tony had still been conscious. Trying to get back up, trying to keep fighting even now that his suit was out of action.

'That shield doesn't belong to you! You don't deserve it! My father made that shield!'

He was right. He didn't deserve the shield.

He had wanted to tell him the truth. Some days he woke up in the morning and thought: 'Today I'll tell him. I have to tell him'. But he never did.

In his letter, he wrote he didn't tell him to spare him. And yes, it was partly true. But the real reason was another one: Tony scared him.

Ever since they first met, Steve was awed by Tony's power. Loki was matching his every blow in that plaza in Stuttgart, and then in came Iron Man, hacking into Natasha's quinjet to play rock music at deafening volume and one-shotting Loki into submission. He then proceeded to challenge Thor without hesitation and later, even without his suit when Steve had tried to talk him down on the helicarrier, Tony was completely fearless.

'Put on the suit. Let's call a few rounds'.

It had felt like playing chicken. Tony wasn't backing down, he wasn't moving an inch. Steve was bigger than him, stronger than him, but Tony wasn't budging. He was defiant. Standing his ground. Planting himself like a tree.

In that moment, fear started pooling deep down in the pit of his stomach. Fear that he would actually put on the suit and attack him.

Later that day, Tony flew a nuclear warhead right into space and single-handedly ended the battle of Manhattan. The Avengers didn't save the world that day. Iron Man did. Steve's fear grew a bit more while he was inviting them to try out Shawarma.

In Siberia, Steve was proven right. He was right to fear him. He hadn't told him because he hadn't
wanted to risk him going after Bucky in a cold blooded act of revenge, but right then and there, in
the heat of the moment, after seeing his parents being brutally executed in front of his eyes while
being absolutely powerless to save them, how could have Tony reacted any differently?

Even against him and Bucky together, Tony was holding his own. He was winning.

When Tony shot Bucky's arm into nothingness, Steve had attacked again, with pure desperation. He
had been reduced to a mindless animal acting only on his survival instincts.

He thought for a moment he was finally getting the upper hand. And then Tony caught his shield
with one hand and shot it away with the other. Ten seconds later, Steve was on his knees.

He tried to appeal to Tony's humanity: 'He's my friend'.

'So was I', Tony had answered, his voice colder than ever before. Right then and there, Steve felt
something break inside him. Something that should have been important, but had always been
ignored.

In the end, only God knows how, they had come out on top. They had made it out, leaving Tony
behind.

Was Pepper saying the truth? Was Tony really injured that badly? So badly that he could have died?

What would happen next? Wakanda was a powerful country. They were safe here. For now.

But Tony was resourceful. He could hack into every computer in the world in a matter of seconds.
Friday could swipe the entirety of the Internet to look for them. Steve had no doubt Tony would find
them here, if he hadn't already.

And then, what would he do? Steve had been so relieved when he had managed to escape from the
Raft with Iron Man nowhere to be seen. He thought Tony had accepted his apology. But if Tony
was still incapacitated after Siberia at the time, that meant he could still come back for a rematch.

'Let them try', had said T'Challa, his voice full of confidence, really believing he could stop the entire
world from trying to apprehend them. But Steve didn't want the world to try. Steve didn't want Tony
to try.

That was what scared him the most about Tony: the Iron Man suit was a technological marvel, and
yet it was but a fraction of what Tony could do. Tony Stark was powerful in ways Thor or the Hulk,
or even Wanda, were never going to be.

He looked tiredly out of the window, and he just knew. He knew Tony would come for them.
Because of Bucky or because of the Accords, it didn't matter. Eventually, he would have to face Iron
Man again.

What have I done?

Chapter End Notes

Learning control of your body through sparring is actually the basics of most, if not
every, Martial Art. Seems only natural to do the same on a higher level with Extremis.
Which means Steve is right to fear Iron Man, now more than ever...
Chapter Summary

Someone attacks the Compound. Tony can't catch a break.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! First action chapter!

Phineas Mason AKA The Tinkerer is a villain in the upcoming movie Spiderman: Homecoming. I based his character's background on some unconfirmed spoilers from the movie, and his appearance on Michael Chernus, the actor playing him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One month had passed since Pepper had pulled her little press conference stunt. When she had told Tony what she was going to do, Tony had disapproved at first, but in the end, as always, she had persuaded him: people were asking questions, and Tony hadn't made any public appearance since Siberia. The meetings with the Accords Committee when he registered his Extremis enhancements had been reserved. His new abilities themselves were top secret. It was time to give the world some answers.

Pepper had assured him she was only gonna give the press the minimal amount of information, nothing more: he had caught up with Steve in Siberia, they had fought, he had been injured. End of story.

Of course she hadn't mentioned the real reason behind that fight. It wasn't her place to do so and she was a woman who respected her boundaries, unlike some other people who thought they could make his decisions for him. And, if he had to be completely honest, he wasn't exactly against the idea of getting back at Steve a little, after that awful excuse of an apology letter.

He had feared that putting pressure on Steve and his team like that would push them to do something stupid, which would have been a problem since Mark 47 was still a long way from being operational. He wasn't ready to fight yet. Well, technically he was, thanks to Extremis, but that just wasn't his style. He was fond of his armor. He was Iron Man after all, not Captain America.

Thankfully, and also rather weirdly, Steve hadn't made a countermove yet. Wherever he was hiding, he was hiding well. Not that he didn't have any suspects - strong suspects - about where they could be. He was simply way too busy to care at the moment.

Earlier that morning, he had had a long conversation on the phone with Vision, who was currently in Vienna, at the very same UN building Zemo had bombed three months earlier. The Accords were not going to amend themselves.

It had completely thrown him off his game when Vision asked him if he could help in his quest to improve the Accords. The android's explanation was full of logic: "I thought my equation was
correct. I thought oversight was something all the Avengers could and would agree on, but obviously I hadn't considered all the variables. That is why I wish to help you: to better understand those variables so I don't miss them or ignore them again."

Tony wasn't going to say no. Amending the Accords was a long, complex process. He was gonna take all the help he could get.

He was currently driving from the Compound back to the Tower in Manhattan when his phone ringed again:

"Boss..."

"Friday, what's up, girl?"

"The Compound is being attacked..."

He wasn't sure he heard right. He hoped he hadn't: "What?" he asked breathlessly.

"Someone is hacking in... Boss, I..."

She didn't finish what she was saying. What was going on? "Friday? Friday, you there?"

This time her voice came in strained: "Boss... I don't feel right..."

Dread washed over him: was someone hacking her? "Friday, run full diagnostics" he ordered. He got no answer.

"Friday? Can you hear me?"

"Boss, I... I don't understand..."

Shit. "Stay with me, Friday!"

He made a J-turn that earned him a few angry honks from some drivers he nearly crashed into, before hammering down the accelerator and launching himself back in the direction he came from.

He was driving his usual Audi R8. Not his fastest car, but still a pretty quick ride. Even so, it took him two hours to get back to the Compound.

For the whole drive, he tried his best to keep Friday talking, like someone would do a badly wounded person about to lose consciousness. Friday sounded frightened. She had never been attacked before. He briefly wondered if Jarvis had been so frightened too, when Ultron had assaulted him.

Jarvis now was gone. Please not Friday too.

After what seemed like an eternity, an eternity driving at breakneck speed, finally the Compound appeared at the end of the road.

"Friday?"

"I... I hear you, Boss..."

"Can you open the garage doors?"

She didn't answer. Why wasn't she answering?
His instinct was to turn the car around and drive back to the Tower to check on Friday's main computers. But there wasn't time for that. And she said the attack was here at the Compound, so that was where she was being hacked. That was where he had to be.

_Hang on, Friday. Please, hang on._

The doors were still closed. He didn't have time for this. There was only one thing for it.

_To hell with this. Sorry, car,_ he thought before engaging first gear and slamming his foot on the right pedal. Six hundred horsepowers propelled him through the reinforced glass doors and their steel frames as if they weren't there. He stepped hard on the brakes, but the car still had too much momentum. He crashed against the far wall of the garage.

The airbag exploded, knocking him back for a moment. When he gathered his wits, he caught out the corner of the eye two men dressed in black tactical gear, bearing AR-15 assault rifles, coming towards him from his right.

He acted fast, unbuckling the seatbelt and getting out of the car as fast as he could. He ducked behind the wreck just as the two opened fire.

_They're not just hacking in. They're physically here._

_Oh God, Rhodey and Helen are here too!_

They kept shooting for a good twenty seconds before stopping. Tony was almost completely unarmed.

Mark 47 was still a useless skeleton, Mark 46 was completely out of action - _fuck you, Steve_ - and he hadn't gotten around to repair it yet. The previous suits, Mark 43 and 45, were back at the Tower, and Mark 44, the Hulkbuster, was in the stratosphere. He could call down Veronica, but he needed one of his standard armors to interface with it. And at the moment, Friday didn't seem capable of remotely flying one of them here from Manhattan.

_Alright then, fuck it. We're doing it old school._ It was time to put Extremis to the test.

"Get out of there and put your hands where I can see 'em!" one of the goons yelled. Tony activated his watch that turned into the open glove he had used in Berlin, peeked over the roof of the car and shot a repulsor right in the face of the closest guy.

The beam shot him right through his forehead. Obviously his compatriot opened fire again. Tony ducked back behind the car and waited.

When the goon ran out of bullets, he jumped out and attacked. The man was reloading his gun when Tony grabbed the barrel of the rifle and yanked it off his hands. The poor guy was pulled forward towards Tony, who promptly kicked him in the face so hard that he collided with the ceiling, before falling back on the floor.

He observed the dead body for a moment: Extremis had made it a child's game. _Well, not bad,_ he thought. But he had to hurry: reinforcements were probably on their way.

He snatched the rifle, taking out the magazine to check it was fully loaded before clipping it back in place. Sure enough, three more men barged into the garage.

They didn't even have time to raise their guns. Three bullets, all to the head, in less than three seconds. Apparently Extremis had also shortened his reaction time and improved his reflexes quite a
Romanoff would be proud.

"Friday, you with me?"

"Boss... I'm scared..."

"I'm here, baby girl. Don't worry, it's gonna be alright. Have you run diagnostics yet?"

"Y-yes... all my- my systems are nominal, but I'm still detecting an anomaly... Boss, I don't know what's going on..."

It was breaking his heart to hear her so distressed. She was suffering, and he was wasting time with these jokers. He had to hurry.

"Keep talking, Fri. Can you tell me where Helen and Rhodey are?"

"S... Scanning..."

He had to move. Gun raised, he started through the corridors towards the main building. More men came, but they were no match for him.

"Boss, Colonel Rhodes and D-Doctor Cho are in the c-conference room... They l-locked themselves in..."

"Good work, Friday. Hang in there, you're doing great" he said, before starting to run towards his friends' location. The last corridor before the conference room was busy, however. Six lackeys were crowding it.

The first two never saw it coming: Tony littered them in bullet holes before running out of ammo and ducking inside an empty room for cover. The third guy came for him, but Tony was faster: he jumped up in front of him, slamming his knee on the man's nose and knocking him backwards about twenty feet. He tossed his spent rifle at the fourth guy, hitting him in the face before running up to him and roundhouse kicking him. The guy was propelled to the side wall so hard that his head broke the drywall.

The fifth guy managed to open fire, clipping Tony on his left forearm. Tony retaliated with his glove, striking him straight in the heart.

Both Tony and the last guy scrambled for cover. Tony's arm was bleeding, but the wound, searing hot with Extremis, was already cauterizing itself. A couple of already boiling blood drops trickled to the floor and immediately evaporated.

He heard two gunshots. When he peeked his head out, he saw the last minion slumping dead to the ground. Rhodey then limped out of the conference room with his leg braces, a sidearm in his hand.

Relief washed over Tony as he ran to him. Helen was cowering inside the room, under a table.

"What the hell is going on? Who are these guys?" she asked.

"I have no idea, but they are evidently well organized. Something tells me they knew Vision and I were not going to be here today. They are hacking Friday somehow..."

"What? How is-" Rhody started before Tony stopped him with his hand: "Friday, talk to me" he ordered.

"I'm still detecting that anomaly... I don't know... Boss, please, help me..."
"I'm here, baby girl. Just hang on okay? Are they in the server room?"

"Y-yes Boss... The... The source of the hack is in there and I'm-I'm detecting six... no, seven, there are seven heat signatures in the server room... n-nobody else in the building... please, Boss..."

"Stay with me, Fri. I'm on my way" he assured. He then turned to Rhodey and Helen: "You guys-

"Oh, don't you dare, Tony. I'm not staying here"

"Rhodey, please, it could be-"

"Dangerous? Yeah, well, I'm the one with military training here, in case you have forgotten. I'm not letting you go alone."

Tony sighed, relenting: "Watch my six?"

Rhodey lifted his gun, smiling: "Always."

Tony was leading, Helen hiding herself behind him and Rhodey was covering the rear. When they made it to the server room, Tony managed to shoot one of the guys there with his gauntlet before all the others retaliated, firing at the open door. Only this time, they were not shooting bullets: the door, the wall around it and the opposite wall were all reduced to rubble by what appeared to be laser beams. Tony recognized the tech, he had fought against it: Chitauri weapons.

"Cease fire!" came a voice from the inside. The shooting immediately stopped. That had to be the leader.

Tony waited for a few moments before revealing himself to the opening of the door. "Tony, what are you doing!? Get back here!" Rhodey hissed. But when Tony showed himself, no one shot him.

Five goons were pointing their weapons at him. The sixth was a rather rotund guy, with a devious smile plastered on his pudgy face: "Well well well. Anthony Edward Stark. We meet again, at last."

Again? "Yes... Indeed we do... Um..."

The smile fell from the guy's face: "Wait... you don't remember me?"

Tony didn't: "Should I?" he asked innocently.

"I'm Phineas Mason, you asshole!" the man seethed.

Tony's mind was blank: "Sorry, doesn't ring any bell..." he apologized.

"I used to work for you! For Stark Industries! Until you fired me!"

Of course. Now Tony remembered: "Oh, right, you're the one who tried to register all his projects independently..."

"I had every right to! They were MY projects!"

"Not when I was the one paying for your research, they weren't. You were working for me, you can't expect me to pay for your toys and do whatever the hell you want with the results..."

Mason scoffed: "Well, now I will. Look at me: I managed to hack in the Avengers Compound! The most secure building in the world! I got inside the world-famous Stark network without problems! Now I will give you a taste of your own medicine!"
"Boss, please... hurry..." came Friday's distressed voice through his earpiece.

He scanned the room and noticed an EMP-like device connected to one of the servers. He smiled evilly: "Without problems, you say?" he sneered, before firing his gauntlet at the device.

The nasty contraption crackled with electricity and promptly shut down. Mason was furious: "No! You bastard! Kill him!" he ordered his men. Tony went on the offensive, attacking the lackeys while Mason frantically snatched a laptop, tucking it under his arm, and began to run away.

Tony had already taken down two of the guys when the external wall exploded. Mason ran out in the open where a helicopter was waiting for him with the rotors still running.

Oh no you don't! Tony thought, before taking aim and firing. Mason's laptop went up in flames. Mason swore in anger and pain, but continued running. He leapt onto the chopper with remarkable agility for someone his size, and the bird immediately flew away.

Tony didn't have time for that. He ducked behind a desk while the three remaining goons shot at him. The desk was turned to dust in seconds, but right then Rhodey attacked too, firing his gun from the door and shooting two of the guys dead. The third quickly met the same fate at the hand of Tony's gauntlet.

Tony watched the helicopter fly away for a few seconds. If only he had his armor, he could have taken down that fucker with his eyes closed. But he had other priorities now:

"Friday?" he called. She answered, but not in the way he hoped: "Boss... please, get me out..." she muttered in an almost begging tone.

What? Get me out?

What did she mean?

It didn't make sense. Her diagnostics said all her systems were running normally, and he had fried the EMP device. The hack should be over now.

Before he could think more about it, he heard something: a series of dull thuds.

It came from three rooms down the corridors, and he had only picked it up thanks to Extremis enhancing his hearing. It was the room where Helen had installed the Cradle.

They all ran there. The Cradle was activated, and inside, someone was banging on the obfuscated glass to be let out. What the hell?

"There's... there's someone inside?"

"Helen, open it!"

She did. Sure enough, inside the Cradle was a young girl. She had copper red hair brushing past her shoulders, a light speck of freckles and big, brown eyes blown wide with fear and disorientation.

Tony had never seen her before, but he knew who she was. He knew, because her appearance was exactly how he had pictured her when he had first programmed her. That's impossible...

"Friday?"

"B-Boss?"
...and there's the twist.
Tony kneeled next to the Cradle. The girl was looking at him like a deer caught in headlights. He saw she was quivering, and that made him come back to reality: she was scared out of her mind. Her skin was glistening with sweat and that's when he realized she was in the exact same condition as any other newborn: in her birthday suit.

He immediately blinked out of his stupor: "Helen, get some clothes. Rhodes, out." he ordered immediately. The two were absolutely flustered, but complied without uttering a sound.

Helen handed him a hospital gown, and he immediately wrapped Friday's body in it. That was when she spoke again: "Boss, what's happening?"

Her voice was absolutely broken. Pleading. God, she's having a panic attack. For a few infinite seconds, Tony felt lost.

Then he looked up and saw the surveillance camera in the corner of the ceiling. Immediately his brain kicked into gear and everything made sense: sensory overload. She's not focusing.

He took her face in his hands: "Friday- Friday, look at me! Shut down all surveillance feed and every secondary protocol" he told her, gazing into her wild eyes.

"B-Boss, I-

"Do it, Friday."

She did. He checked when the red LED on the surveillance camera turned off. Friday's eyes immediately started to focus: "Good. You got it, baby girl, there you go" Tony soothed.

She was slowly starting to focus, but he had to calm her down: "Now I want you to breathe, ok? Look at me: in..." he took an exaggerated breath through his nose, "...and out..." he let the air out of his mouth.

Friday didn't speak. She just did what he told her to do. They kept their gazes locked while Friday's breath became less and less labored, and her trembling slowly receded. Tony stroked her cheeks slowly with his thumbs, smiling at her, hoping to give her comfort. She was looking at him as if he was the only person in the world, the only one with answers to her questions.
He took in the delicate curves of her jawline and cheekbones, the cut of her eyes and the light, barely noticeable freckles on her cheeks. Something warm, warm in a way that had nothing to do with Extremis, swelled in Tony's heart.

When her breathing was down to normal, she looked down to her hands: "Boss... what happened to me? Where am I?"

"You're in the Compound, Friday. Somehow that hack triggered the Cradle and you were synthetized in a physical body..."

"But... but how? I-I can still run all my- my programs... and..."

He couldn't stand hearing his baby girl so miserable. He hugged her and held her tight: "We are going to figure this out, Friday. I promise you. Don't worry, I got you. You're gonna be fine."

"I-I am?"

"You are, Fri. I swear to you."

She hesitated only another moment before tentatively hugging him back.

***

He was looking through the observation glass while Helen ran her tests in the medical room. Friday was sitting on the table while Helen was moving a stethoscope on her back, listening to her heartbeat.

*Her heartbeat. Friday has an actual heart now.* He still couldn't wrap his mind around it.

Rhodey silently joined him, looking at the mysterious girl with an expression as lost as Tony's own. He broke the silence first: "So, I know the last hours have been a bit hectic but... what the eff happened?"

Tony visibly deflated: "I'm not sure. Helen told me she was running tests on the Cradle when the hack started. I figure Friday's matrix somehow got downloaded by the Cradle's program which read it as a genetic profile... and here we are."

"So you're saying we have another Vision now?" Rhodey asked.

"Yes and no... Vision's made entirely out of vibranium; Friday's body is made of the material the Cradle uses to regenerate tissues. It's basically synthetic stem cells enhanced with Extremis... and not only that: when Vision was born, he completely absorbed Jarvis' code. Friday seems still able to run her protocols..."

"How is that possible? It... Does that mean she's both a computer and the girl we're looking at?"

"It's my best guess right now... I need to check on her matrix at the Tower but I think somehow she has a hive mind..."

"A hive mind? So her program form and her physical body think exactly the same?"

"Maybe. Probably she was having a panic attack because it was the first time she felt with her human senses, but at the same time she was still seeing and hearing through cameras and microphones like she's always done. That's why she was so freaked out."

Helen chose that moment to come out: "She's perfectly healthy, as far as I can tell," she started, "I'm
running analysis on her blood samples but... what happened today is something even I can't
comprehend entirely. She's not like Vision. She's not an android. She's almost human..."

"Almost?" inquired Tony.

"Well, her cells are synthetic, of course... Actually I'm not even sure how it happened, the Cradle is
supposed to read the DNA of an existing tissue to regenerate it, not create it out of thin air..."

Tony looked back at the girl in the room. She was still sitting on the table, looking down at her hands
in her lap, slowly opening and closing her fists.

What was she thinking right now? She had to be so confused...

He used to know absolutely everything about her. Now that had changed. She was changed.

"I still don't believe it", Helen continued, "she's... she's something unique..."

Unique.

Was she human? Was she an android? Was she something in between? Tony was at a complete loss.

Without asking anything to anyone, he left Rhodey and Helen and got into the room.

Friday seemed so relieved when she saw him enter: "Boss..." she greeted. She looked at him like she
had before: her entire world had been thrown upside down, and he was the only thing that hadn't
changed.

Tony sat down next to her: "How are you feeling, Friday?"

"Okay, I guess... I feel a little sting where Doctor Cho drew blood from my arm... Is that what pain
feels like?"

"Yes... yes, it is. Friday, you said that your diagnostics didn't detect anything wrong with your
protocols?"

"No... at least, not that I know of... you think my matrix is somehow corrupted?"

There was fear in her voice while she was asking that. Because in her mind, a corrupted program
was useless, if not harmful, and had to be erased.

Tony immediately reassured her: "No, Friday, I don't think so. Listen, I'm taking you back to the
Tower and we'll check your mainframe together, ok?"

"But I'm already at the- oh, you mean take me physically there..."

Tony smiled: "Yeah... you'll have to get used to it: welcome to the physical world. Here we need to
travel to get to places" he quipped. Friday looked at him and tentatively returned his smile.

***

In half an hour, a Stark Industries helicopter was waiting for Tony and Friday at the Compound's
helipad. She had changed out of the hospital gown and into some blue scrubs. Tony kept an arm
around her shoulders as he walked her to the chopper.

The place was already crowded with law enforcement and SI security personnel. The cops were
taking care of all the guys Tony and Rhodey had dispatched, while SI security was making sure no
one touched the server room, and was also retrieving Mason's equipment, starting with the Chitauri weapons. How the hell did he get his hands on those? Tony mentally took note he also had to check how much damage Mason had done to the servers as soon as he could.

Outside the garage, a tow truck was loading his Audi: the front of the car was completely smashed and the passenger side was riddled in bullet holes. I liked that car, dammit!

When they finally arrived at the Tower, Tony settled behind a computer and brought up Friday’s code. She sat beside him the entire time. Tony briefly wondered how she felt to see her own code on the screen.

He ran another full diagnostic, and again he didn't find a single glitch. It was true: all of Friday's systems were still working perfectly. Well then, it was the moment of truth: "Friday, you think you can turn the surveillance feed back on? Start slowly, just the cameras on this floor, then the whole tower" he asked softly.

She squeezed her eyes shut and a look of absolute concentration came up on her face. For a few moments, she didn't move an inch.

"Friday-"

"Just a second, Boss."

Her voice was not coming from her mouth. It was coming from the speakers. He looked up and he saw the surveillance camera was active.

Friday slowly opened her eyes: "It feels so weird" she said. This time she was speaking with her mouth, though the beginning of the phrase came out of the speakers too.

She was slowly reactivating all of her systems: "It's difficult... I need to balance my thoughts with the output from the external sources..."

Tony smiled: "Well, you're probably gonna need training... you know, like I did with Extremis?"

"Yes... I think I need to keep the external output on my hard disks and my own stimuli in my brain... only mixing them up in small bits at a time..." she said, still sounding concentrated.

"See, you're figuring it out already," Tony praised, looking at his baby girl with a smile. He was so proud of her: 'maybe we can ask Vision if he can help you with that when he gets back, what do you say? Virtual meditation exercises or something like that? He should be here tomorrow evening."

"It would probably be for the best" Friday agreed, returning his smile. Then, it dropped right out of her face.

Tony became concerned: "Friday, baby girl, what is it?"

"Boss... Am I causing you troubles?" she asked, sounding upset, "I mean, this... this is definitely a setback for you, and you're so busy..."

That warm feeling he felt when she got out of the Cradle was back with a vengeance. He took her hands in his own: "Friday, look at me: it wasn't your fault that this happened, not to mention I don't think of this as a bad thing, and anyway you are never, ever, causing me troubles. I'll keep everything else on hold for as long as you need me to. Okay?"

She looked at him with a hint of a smile and nodded: "Okay. Thank you, Boss."
"Good. Glad we're clear on that" he stated. Her smile became more convinced.

***

"It's official, Tony: she is human" came Helen's voice through the phone.

Tony actually wanted to pat himself on the back for how well he was taking this phone call. He thought he was going to lose his shit completely, instead he barely raised an eyebrow: "Okay... What else have you found?"

"Well, as you figured out, the Cradle's scanners read Friday's matrix and interpreted it as a string of DNA. In order to create her tissues from scratch, the Cradle integrated Extremis deeper than normal into her cells. It's still a lower concentration than yours, but significantly higher than Rhodey or Pepper."

"Right..." he said simply, inviting Helen to continue.

"However, her DNA is entirely compatible with a human one," Helen explained, "so yeah, she's human. A modified, artificial, synthetic, enhanced human with a hive mind that also runs computers, but a human nonetheless."

Tony felt a strange sense of relief: "Well, at least now I can tell her what she is, it's a start..."

"Yeah... and where do we go from here?" Helen asked nervously.

Tony sighed: "You're talking about the Accords, right?" Helen matched his sigh: "Well, she fits perfectly into the definition of 'enhanced individual'. I'm sure you could keep her off the radar if you tried, but..."

But.

Yeah, Helen was right. He couldn't very well hide Friday in the tower forever. She deserved to have a chance at life. And that meant signing the Accords.

Which, in turn, meant dealing with Ross.

Well, if that douche thought he could put his hands on Friday, he was going to be disappointed. Politicians tried and failed to put their grabby hands on Iron Man, and he was not about to let them anywhere near his baby girl. If Ross was going to be difficult, he would deal with Tony Stark.

In that moment, Pepper frantically barged through the door: "Tony!? What happened at the Comp-" she stopped short when she noticed the young girl sitting next to him.

"Good evening, Miss Potts" she greeted, smiling, with Friday's voice. Pepper looked at Tony with a look of utter confusion.

"Funny and interesting story," Tony started to explain.

Chapter End Notes

A quick clarification about Friday's 'hive mind': it also means that, if her new physical form were to die, her programs would still keep running. Or, in turn, if her program was
to be crippled or destroyed like JARVIS was by Ultron, her body and her brain wouldn't be affected. However, in both those cases, she would experience what death feels like, and it obviously wouldn't be pretty. (Spoiler alert: don't worry, neither of those things will happen). And finally, it means that if a certain witch were to ever try and get in her brain... well she could, but Friday's program would recognize the attack and fight back...
Sokovia Accords

Chapter Summary

Solving some bureaucratic issues Friday's new status poses.

Chapter Notes

We have heard a lot about the UN panel who works on the Sokovia Accords. Let's meet a few of them in person, shall we?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Sokovia Accords were created with the Avengers in mind, but they also regulated the registration of new enhanced individuals. Evaluation and registration of said individuals could happen in one of two ways: for people acting internationally, crossing foreign borders on a regular basis, the registration had to be decided by the Sokovia Accords Central Committee at the United Nations. Local enhanced who acted within their homeland's borders could instead be registered by national subcommittees, that every signatory nation had instituted shortly before the Accords were ratified.

Normally, it wasn't mandatory for enhanced individual to sign the Accords, but Friday's case wasn't exactly normal: an AI that can get everywhere in the Net suddenly gaining a physical body? That sounded a lot like Ultron. And with a precedent like that, the UN demanded safeguards.

Tony and Pepper considered the option of having Friday being registered by the American subcommittee: that would have taken Ross entirely out of the picture, 'cause he was in the main panel, but with Friday being all over the Internet, the local subcommittee really wasn't a feasible alternative. It had to be the Central Committee at the UN.

Tony and Friday were sitting in one of the waiting rooms of the UN Building in New York. Their hearing was about to start.

She was nervous: she was looking right at the wall in front of her, her hands in her lap, her fingers fidgeting. Tony didn't blame her: no one had ever questioned what she was. Especially now that nobody was exactly sure. And it wasn't exactly a test she could fail either: a negative evaluation would have led to a long probation period, maybe even flat out imprisonment if Ross had his way. Which he won't, Tony told himself.

He took one of her hands reassuringly in his own: "Hey," he called. She diverted her gaze from the - apparently - incredibly interesting wall to look at him.

"Everything is gonna be alright. We've been over this many times: I go in first and lay down the facts. Then it's your turn. Do you trust me?"

She smiled softly: "I do, Boss."
"Then don't worry. We got this in the bag."

Before she could respond, one of the guards entered the room: "Mr. Stark, they are ready for you" he said.

Tony squeezed Friday's hand: "Here we go" he whispered.

***

The Sokovia Accords Central Committee was formed by delegates of all the one hundred and seventeen signatory nations - now one hundred and eighteen; Romania had wanted in right after Cap's little field trip in Bucharest. However, if the employment of enhanced was the main point, registration of new enhanced was a somewhat secondary occurrence, and similar questions were decided by only seven delegates on a four month period rotation. Deciding on Friday's registration were the delegates of the United States, Sokovia, Wakanda, India, Germany, Italy and Chile.

Of course, the US delegate was Ross.

He strutted into the room and claimed his seat with an arrogant smile on his face and his chest swelling out, looking at him with disgust and contempt like a perfectly educated nobleman of old looking down at a worthless, ill-mannered commoner. He no doubt thought he held all the power in this situation.

Tony only smiled back: poor deluded fool. I'm gonna make you lower your tail, you arrogant peacock, he thought.

The other delegates took their seats one by one, and the meeting was declared open.

"Mr. Stark," the Indian delegate, a woman in her fifties named Indira Karthikeyan, started, "you called this meeting to discuss the registration of an enhanced individual."

"That is correct." Tony answered.

"An enhanced individual that was first created by you yourself as an Artificial Intelligence and then was synthetized in a physical body." the Sokovian delegate spat. He was a bitter old man named Emiliyan Suvorov. Tony really couldn't hold it against him very much: last time an AI went to Sokovia, a city had fallen from the sky.

"Yes." he answered simply.

"By accident" Ross pressed. He was openly smiling now.

Tony didn't rise to the bait: "I've sent the Committee a detailed report regarding the events that led to Friday acquiring a human body," he answered, deliberatly using the term human body, not simply physical body, "I trust you've read it." he added, looking pointedly at Ross.

The Secretary's smile fell completely, while a teasing smile appeared on some of the other delegates' faces.

Kurt Leutjens, the German delegate, spoke next: "Mr. Stark, you'll have to forgive us if we appear wary. I seem to remember that Ultron was a similar occurrence..." he stated.

Karthikeyan however answered before Tony could: "To be fair, Delegate Leutjens, the Vision was also a similar occurrence."
Tony was heartened to see someone was already taking his side. Even more so when Princess Shuri, the Wakandan delegate, immediately sided with Karthikeyan: "Precisely," she said, "Artificial Intelligences aren't necessarily evil just because they are artificial."

Shuri was T'Challa's younger sister, heir to the throne of Wakanda. She was by far the youngest of all the members of the Sokovia Accords committee, and yet she seemed wiser than most of them. She's only twenty-four, Tony thought with admiration. Wanda is two years older than her, and Steve says she's just a kid. Yeah, right.

Leutjens was way older than Shuri, but an equally reasonable man. He was the one who had openly defended Tony when Ross wanted to dissect him for Extremis, after all. Acknowledging the objections the two women had raised, the German delegate nodded to them respectfully and relented.

Suvorov, on the other hand, wasn't even remotely appeased: "It doesn't mean they are necessarily good either," he said with more heat that before, "my country has suffered greatly at the hands of one of such beings."

"That's exactly why I'm proposing tests to understand what this being known as Friday is" Ross prevaricated. Tony however wasn't even remotely fazed: all the delegates in the room short of Suvorov rolled their eyes at the Secretary. Karthikeyan even muttered something along the lines of 'here we go again'.

Tony intervened: "I asked you if you read my report, Delegate Ross, but obviously you haven't," he said in a patronizing tone, "Doctor Helen Cho and I have already run every possible test on Friday. The answer to your question, 'what is she?', is right there."

Ross was about to retort but Federico De La Rosa, the Italian delegate, spoke before he could: "I'm sorry, Mr. Stark," he started, taking off his glasses and raising his hands in a surrender gesture. He looked like he didn't want to be here, like he had been dragged into something bigger than him:

"I read your report, and I agree with you that the answer to the question 'what is she?' is in here... or at least I think so, after all I'm not exactly a computer expert, nor am I a doctor, and definitely not a biologist," he said with a sheepish expression, "but I don't think the artificial nature of this individual is the point. I think the question we need to ask ourselves is not 'what is she?', but rather 'what can she do?' And even more importantly, 'what are her intentions?' That's what the Accords should be about."

That was exactly where Tony wanted the discussion to go: "Friday's protocols are completely unaltered," he explained, "she hasn't gained any homicidal subroutines or other Ultron-related malwares."

"How can you be sure?" Suvorov accused, "You first built Ultron as a peacekeeping program after all, did you not?"

It was Isabel Montoya, from Chile, who diffused the situation before it could escalate further: "I think the only one who can answer Delegate De La Rosa's questions would be the girl herself. Perhaps a hearing with her is in order..." she said.

"See, that's why you're my favourite, Isabel." De La Rosa quipped. Montoya went slightly red and looked down at her desk.

Ross was positively fuming, but he kept quiet this time.

It was Leutjens who spoke then, drawing Tony's attention away from the funny tension between
Montoya and De La Rosa: "Mr. Stark, do you have any objection to this committee speaking with Friday?"

"I do not, Delegate Leutjens." he said simply.

***

When he came out of the room, Friday immediately jumped to her feet: "So? How is it going?" she asked nervously.

"Pretty good, actually." he answered with a smile.

"Is it my turn yet?" she asked then.

"Yes." was all he said.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself.

Tony took her hands in his: "Alright, listen: Suvorov and Ross are going to be against you. One's still understandably angry about Ultron and the other is just a petty asshole, so don't bother trying to convince them."

"Don't bother with Ross and Suvorov, got it."

"Shuri and Karthikeyan are already pretty much on our side, so they'll support you or at the very least they'll keep quiet. The three you need to convince are Leutjens, Montoya and De La Rosa. They are the three neutral ones and they will be those who can tip the odds..."

"Convince Leutjens, Montoya and De La Rosa I'm not a threat. Alright."

"Alright?"

"Alright. I can do that."

"Piece of cake, right?"


"Okay, get in there and get this over with" he encouraged.

She took another deep breath to center herself, rotating her shoulders to loosen them and cracking her neck to both sides, as if gearing up for a fight.

"Friday" he called. She turned to him.

"Just be yourself." he said.

She smiled, now calmer than before.

***

Tony was still waiting outside the room when Pepper and Happy arrived: "How's it going, Tony?" the woman asked.

"I have a good feeling." he answered smiling.

As if on cue, one of the guards opened the door and Friday exited the room.
"There she is! How was it, kid?" asked Happy.

Friday smiled uncertainly: "I think I managed to convince them... at least I hope so. They said I can go home and that they will let me know their decision in three weeks maximum... Secretary Ross was pretty upset when his proposition of further mandatory testing was entirely rejected. Princess Shuri even openly reprimanded him."

Hearing this, Tony looked like the cat that got the cream. His only regret was not having been there to see the good Secretary's face when he was put in his place by a twenty-four year old girl.

*Consider your tail lowered, peacock.*

"So they said you can go home?" Pepper asked with a smile.

"Apparently," was Friday's response.

"Well, what are we doing still here?" Pepper beamed.

"I'll bring the car around" Happy decided, also smiling, leaving the three.

Tony, Pepper and Friday started towards the exit too.

"Boss, can I ask you something?" asked Friday.

"What is it?" Tony retorted.

"Do you think Delegates Montoya and De La Rosa are romantically involved?"

So she noticed that too. Tony laughed: "Nah. Well... I don't think so? It's just, De La Rosa is a bit of a vamp and Montoya is an uptight, old-fashioned kind of person. He likes messing with her, is all" he explained.

"Well, he sounds like the type of guy you would get along nicely with," Pepper joked, "perhaps you can invite him for a drink one of these days" she smiled.

"Eh, I don't think it's a good idea. I don't want them to think I'm trying to buy one of the delegates deciding on Friday. Besides, I'm not like that anymore, Pep. You know I have eyes only for you" he smiled back.

"Yeah? That why Friday's got red hair?" she teased, but both Tony and Friday couldn't help but think her question was serious. And in Friday's case, well, she found herself curious about the answer too.

"Baby, you know it. Now let's just go home." Tony answered.

"Actually, no," Pepper retorted, "if you modeled Friday after me, in a way it means she's my daughter, right?"

That gave Tony pause. In a sense it was true, but... if Pepper was Friday's mother, that meant he was her-

He pushed that thought away as soon as it appeared. *Creator. Programmer. NOT father.*

The mere concept of having children scared the hell out of Tony. He would just screw them up the way Howard did with him.

But Pepper had a point: "Yeah, I guess you could see it that way. And so?"
"So now, I'm taking my proxy-kid shopping. What do you say, Fri? You up for a bit of mother-daughter bonding time?"

The young girl looked really happy: "Sure. I'd love to." she beamed.

Tony inwardly groaned.

Chapter End Notes

Not much to say beyond the fact that Ross will cause more problems.
Now that the Friday situation was on hold with the Accords Committee, Tony had to get to work on Phineas Mason.

He had retrieved all he could from the attack at the Compound, including the Chitauri weapons, the broken EMP-hacking device and the destroyed laptop Mason was trying so desperately to save when he ran away. When he analyzed the laptop's remains, he noticed Mason had started several downloads. He hadn't gotten far because Tony had crashed his party, and all the downloads had been incomplete. What surprised Tony was the content of said downloads: there weren't any SI projects, which was to be expected because Tony didn't keep those in the Compound's server.

No, all of the material was related to the Avengers: Quinjets specifics and flight paths, pieces of equipment like Widow Bites and the EXO-7 Falcon suit, all the way down to the personal files of every member of the Avengers. And there was the twist: the files he had started downloading first were those of Captain America and his team.

At first Tony had wondered if Cap hadn't hired this pig to erase his and his crew's files to keep the UN off their scent a bit longer. But that wasn't even close to Rogers' MO, and he would never sink that low, anyway. Sure, he was a self-righteous, idiotic asshole and an absolute hypocrite, but he wasn't the type to send minions to do his dirty work for him. No, there had to be something else. Something he was missing.

The hacking device was interesting: it was entirely hand built, and begrudgingly, Tony had to admit this guy knew what he was doing.

It was much the same story with the Chitauri weapons: Mason had reverse-engineered them to make them more user-friendly for humans, but their alien origins were unmistakeable. There were only a handful of those left around the world, you could basically count them on your fingers. Which meant that on the black market they were ridiculously expensive.

Friday ran a background check on Mason's finances, and she found nothing. The guy had 18.551 dollars on a regular bank account, one that was promptly blocked by the authorities after the attack at the Compound, but other than that, nothing. No off-shore accounts, no fake holdings, no secret money deposits at the Cayman, Switzerland or Singapore. It was obvious someone else was behind
him. Someone with deep pockets.

Either way, Mason was going to show up again at some point, and he needed to be ready: he had to get back to work on Mark 47.

He had set up his workshop right next to the garage, where the doors had finally been repaired and reinforced, so this time they would hold even if they were rammed by a tank: it was good he had managed to smash through the doors with his car, but if some bad guy did it, it would be a problem.

Barring his poor Audi, all of the cars Tony had transferred at the Compound when he had moved in had miraculously survived the gunfire with Mason's goons without a single scratch. One of them was a torch red 2016 Corvette Z-06: when he swung by the garage to get to his workshop, he found the car with the hood open, and Friday leaning over the left fender, looking intently inside the engine bay.

She was wearing skin-tight jeans and an oversized black T-shirt with the Metallica logo on its chest, clothes that came from hers and Pepper's shopping spree after the UN hearing. She was staring at the engine of the Corvette as if it held an immense secret that was only waiting for her to be unraveled.

"Hey Friday," he greeted.

She raised her head and smiled at him: "Hey Boss"

"What are you doing?" he asked, curious.

"Oh, nothing much. Just looking at the engine. This car has a supercharger; it makes it more powerful..."

Yes... it did... but what was the point? "Okay... and so?"

"Well, we were talking about Extremis superchargers for Mark 47... I thought I could get a bit of inspiration..."

_Huh._

Well, it wasn't exactly the same thing. On a car, the supercharger simply had to squeeze more compressed air into the engine to give it more power. Extremis superchargers for his suit had to absorb Extremis power from his body, send it to the suit's reactors and make those build up more energy to be fired from the repulsors or the unibeam. All of which without overheating from Extremis, or overloading the reactors, or melt the suit itself in the process. But actually, the principle was indeed the same.

Tony had an idea: "Fri, would you like to help me build the suit?"

She appeared confused: "That's what I'm doing..."

"No, I mean... in the workshop. Working with me."

Her face lit up with excitement: "Really? Can I?"

His heart melted a little at seeing her so excited over one of the things he loved the most in his life: "Sure. Come on, let's get started."

Friday positively _squealed._

They went to the lab together and sat down at Tony's desk. Having Friday right beside him made
him smile like he hadn't in years. Maybe ever.

"So where do we start?" she asked, full of excitement.

"From the most impostant thing: the main arc reactor," he answered as if it was obvious. He took a metal ring that was slightly bigger than a bracelet from a box of spare parts: "This is going to be the frame for the inner casing." he explained, handing it to her.

"And it's gonna be immediately underneath the reactor's core, right?" she asked, taking the ring and turning it around in her hands, examining it.

Tony wasn't surprised she knew that: she had the specifics of every Iron Man armor he had ever built saved in her databases. "Yep. So the first thing we need to do is connect the superconducting magnets to the ring's underside..."

They spent the whole day in the lab. First they built the main reactor, then they modified the project of the auxiliary reactors to make them self-sustained and started to build a prototype. Friday was incredibly talented with every kind of tool: spanners, screwdriver, blowtorch, soldering iron... her innate disposition reminded Tony so much of his own.

He had never had anyone to work with like this in his lab. Sure, he had worked with Bruce on occasion, but he was more of a biochemist than a mechanic. And his bots were nowhere near as crafty as he was.

But Friday was amazing. He wished they never had to come out of the workshop again.

The next day, they tackled the Extremis superchargers. Tony even dismounted the Corvette's supercharger out of the engine and then Friday - completely on her own - disassembled it to its basic components to better understand how it worked, before they put it all back together and back onto the car. Tony started it, and the powerful engine roared to life, Friday scanning it with the X-ray function of the garage's cameras to see it actually working.

They spent the next three days working on the suit's Extremis superchargers. What they came up with in the end were very small but extremely reliable little gizmos, that could be easily fitted into the suit behind each of the reactors, a bigger one for the chest piece and smaller ones for the auxiliaries. They mounted reactors and superchargers to the suit's inner frame, then it was time for some testing.

The results were outstanding, even if it was just a prototype: Friday's readings reported that with the superchargers turned up to the maximum, Mark 47's standard repulsor blasts were about as powerful as the single-reactor powered Mark 45's unibeam. The temperature of the reactors and superchargers had raised slightly under sustained firing, but only by a couple of degrees, so nothing even remotely dangerous. And Tony wasn't fazed in the least, since the heat was actually coming from the Extremis in his body.

After four hours in simulated battle conditions, Tony started to feel slightly winded. He had expected it, after all the superchargers were draining energy from his body. It was a very good result, actually: before Extremis, a four hour battle would have left him completely breathless, not just slightly winded, no matter what suit he fought in.

When they were done with the tests, Tony and Friday added all the secondary circuitry and servo-mechanisms, the more conventional weapons like the missile launchers in the shoulders and forearms, and finally the outer armor plating.

This new armor was by far the best he had ever built. Only slightly behind Veronica in raw power,
but miles ahead of it in mobility, speed and electronics. The only drawback was that Friday wasn’t linked to it: her armor interface was still working, but now that she had her own body, she found it difficult to move the armor without physically being in it. Maybe the training she was having with Vision would help in the long run, but Tony doubted it. From now on, he would have to learn to use his suits without a copilot, but he already had a few ideas around that. With Friday’s help in working out all the kinks, he was sure he could implement them already in his next armor.

And so, nine days after Tony found Friday looking at the engine of his Corvette, the Iron Man armor Mark 47, codename 'Hitman', was finally ready.

The redesign of the suit didn't stop even on the outside: the armor was painted a menacing dark gray from its knees up to the solar plexus, the signature red and gold only appearing on the upper torso, helmet, arms and lower legs.

Somehow, it represented how he felt at the moment: he had suffered a lot recently, but thanks to his family and friends he was slowly getting better.

Tony turned the suit off, stepping out of it and turning around while it closed behind him. He patted the helmet on the cheek twice before taking a few steps back and admiring his handiwork:

"Tony's back, bitches" he muttered, smiling mischievously.

***

Friday and Vision were sitting cross-legged in front of each other on the floor of the gym.

"Are you fully online?" the android asked.

"I am. We may begin", she answered.

He handed her a Rubik cube. She took it and he immediately asked: "Give me the exact Greenwich time."

"Three minutes and eight seconds past eleven, Anti-Meridian" she answered immediately, starting to solve the cube at an impressive speed.

"Year, month and location of the Battle of Leyte Gulf." Vision pressed on immediately after she had answered.

"1944, October, fought in four different locations around the island of Leyte in the Philippines archipelago: Palawan passage, Sibuyan Sea, Surigao Strait and Cape Engano" she answered, handing him back the solved cube.

He took it and handed her a sheet of paper, asking: "Calculate 88.019 multiplied 58.231 and the exact value of the constant Phi."

Immediately she took the paper and started to fold it in a perfect Origami crane. At the same time she answered: "5.125.434.389," and, talking over herself with her speakers, "Your second query can't be answered: Phi is an irrational number and can therefore only be approximated with varying degrees of precision but not exactly calculated."

Exactly when she finished speaking, Vision swung a light punch to her face, which she easily blocked. She smiled and threw the finished paper crane at his face, hitting him on the chin.

Vision smiled back: "Very good, Friday. I think you are fully ready."
"Thank you for your help, Vision" she answered. He simply nodded in acknowledgement.

The android only had one regret: not having helped Wanda with her own powers the way he was helping Friday.

Scarlet Witch was powerful. Very powerful. But power was nothing without control, and Wanda's control over her immense power was very strained. He could have helped her with that after she had joined the Avengers. Perhaps if he had, the tragedy in Lagos could have been averted.

"Hang on... I have a proximity alert..."

Friday's voice brought him back to the here and now: "What is it?" he asked.

"It's a helicopter... I'm notifying the Boss and Colonel Rhodes-

Right then, the sound of a ringtone interrupted Friday: "Hello? Who is this?" she asked accepting the call right when Mr. Stark entered the room.

"It's Fury. Requesting permission to land."

Friday looked at Mr. Stark for confirmation. He simply nodded.

"Permission granted" she said. The communication was cut.

***

When he stepped out of the helicopter, the ex-director of SHIELD looked as threatening as ever, in his usual long leather coat and full black attire. Maria Hill and Sharon Carter flanked him as he walked down the helipad to meet with the residents of the Avengers Compound.

Anyone would have been intimidated by the newcomers, but Tony Stark wasn't exactly 'anyone'. And he had people on his side too: Rhodey, Vision and Friday were all behind him, watching his back.

"Well, if it isn't Colonel Nicholas J. Motherfucking Fury in the flesh. And I see you've even brought along your little harem of angry Amazons. Although, I see the blonde and the brunette, but you're missing the redhead..." Tony greeted in full not-so-passive aggressive mode.

That immediately earned him opposite reactions from the women in question: Carter flinched and avoided eye-contact with a guilty expression, opting to stare at an indefinite spot on his chest instead, while Hill narrowed her eyes scathingly at him, looking like she was trying to burn two holes in his skull. He simply stared back. *I'm the one with Extremis here, Former Deputy Director. If anyone of us had laser eyes, it would be me*, he thought.

Everyone noticed the staring contest, but no one said anything. Fury was also staring him down with his menacing one eye. Probably hoping to scare him or something.

Yeah, no. That drill sargeant stare could work on Rogers, maybe. Not him.

"You're such a good observer when it comes to women, ain't you, Stark?" Fury scoffed.

"Flatterer. But no, I'm a good observer full stop. For example, where the fuck were you four months ago when Rogers was tearing Europe to pieces?" Tony retorted, not without a hint of malice.

"Classified." Fury answered icily.
"Figures. So what brings you here? 'Cause if you think you still have some sort of authority on the Avengers, think again. We work for the UN now."

"Well, I'm here because of the Avengers, yes, but not to discuss the chain of command. It's actually about the missing redhead."

Tony gritted his teeth.

Romanoff.

Her stabbing him in the back at Leipzig still stung. Rhodey got hurt because of that. Rogers and Barnes escaped because she switched sides. Everything went to hell because Black Widow had to be Black Widow-ish at the worst possible moment and then blame my ego for it.

"What about her, she can't come here and talk for herself?" Tony asked with contempt.

"See, that's the point," said Fury, "we're pretty sure she can't. She's been kidnapped."

Chapter End Notes

The armor codename, 'Hitman', comes from the movies and videogames of the same name, where the protagonist is called 'Agent 47'.

Chapter Summary

So Natasha has been kidnapped. What will Tony do?

Chapter Notes

According to the MCU official timeline, Tony is born on May 29, 1970, and his parents died on December 16, 1991. However, it is stated in Iron Man 1 that Obadiah Stane had taken over as CEO of Stark Industries after Howard's death, and then Tony takes over when he's 21. Many people tend to move Tony's birth date to 1974, so he's seventeen and freshly graduated at the time his parents died. I was about to do that too, but Howard's old film reels in Iron Man 2 from the 1974 Stark Expo briefly show a young Tony, who's definitely not just a few months old. Thus, I'm moving Tony's birth to 1972, so he's two years old in those old film reels, nineteen when his parents die, and twenty-one when he becomes CEO of Stark Industries in 1993.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony, Rhodey, Vision and Friday were all taken aback. It sounded like a bad joke.

"Natasha Romanoff has been kidnapped?" Rhodey asked, almost laughing in Fury's face, "You know how ridiculous that sounds, right?"

But Fury's expression didn't change in the slightest. If anything it darkened even further: "Let them hear, Carter" he ordered.

Sharon took out her phone and thumbed it. A voicemail message started to play with Natasha's strained voice:

"Sharon, I'm in trouble... I need help... These... ah... these guys aren't messing around... we need some serious backup-"

Natasha was interrupted by some unintelligible shouting, followed by noises of something cracking. Natasha let out a pained scream as the voicemail abruptly ended.

Well, shit.

It sounded real. And pretty serious. Natasha's voice was raspy and pained. Apparently someone really had managed to get the jump on her.

Didn't mean it was Tony's problem, though: "Sorry Nick, we can't help you. We need to be authorized either by the Accords Committee for an international mission, or by the American Subcommittee for actions within our borders," he said.

"Here," Fury produced a tablet, "authorization for Iron Man to conduct a rescue mission, signed and
approved by the head of the Sokovia Accords US Subcommittee. I still have a bit of pull" he said, handing it to Tony.

Tony was not impressed. *Is that how it is?* "Such efficiency. I don't like being handed things, sorry." he said, holding Fury's gaze, "Why Iron Man alone and not all the Avengers?"

Fury gave him the stink eye: "I don't have *that* much pull. And anyway, you mean all two currently active Avengers?"

Both Tony and Rhodey narrowed their eyes at Fury's jab. Vision took the paper instead: "The US subcommittee? So Miss Romanoff is being held here in the States?"

"We managed to track Natasha's message somewhere in Ohio before they stopped us" Sharon told him.

"I have a pretty good tracking system" Fury bragged.

Tony scoffed: "Not that good. Give it here" he said, holding a hand to Sharon to have her phone. She gave it to him.

"Friday?" Tony called, tossing her the phone. Friday caught it expertly and thumbed it. Natasha's message started replaying for a moment, but the girl stopped it, tapping on the screen a few more times. Twenty seconds later, she tossed the phone back to Sharon.

"I have the exact coordinates." Friday said.

"Good. Give them to Nicky so he can leave." Tony answered, turning on his heels and starting back towards the Compound.

Friday could see the surprise on all of their faces. She would have even found it funny, in a different situation.

Fury was the one who recovered the fastest: "Stark, I need your help!" he shouted to Tony's retreating form.

"And I gave it to you," Tony answered, not looking back and not stopping, "You have Romanoff's exact location. That is me helping you. After all I'm just a consultant, you know?"

Hill was looking at him as if he had grown a second head: "So you're just going to wash your hands about this? Natasha Romanoff is in danger!" she shrieked.

This time, Tony actually stopped and turned around: "Hill, you seem to be under the deluded impression that I give a fuck. Let me explain it to you: Natasha Romanoff had the chance to stop Rogers and Barnes in Germany. Instead, she let them go, even assaulting King T'Challa in the process to help them escape in MY plane, leading to Rhodey here being injured and, later, to me nearly dying in Siberia. Not only that: she even had the nerve to say it was my ego's fault. So yes, I'm just gonna wash my hands about this. Don't worry, she's a big girl, she can take care of herself. And if she can't, it's not my problem."

Hill was at a loss of words, which made Tony feel a lot more pleased with himself that he should have.

Fury, instead, rolled his eyes: "Do you really want to hear me say it out loud? Fine: I was wrong. Okay?"
Tony tilted his head in curiosity. Fury continued: "I was wrong to give too much credit to Romanoff's evaluation and not consider that you were dying at the time. I was wrong put Rogers in charge of this team and leave him to his own devices without ever asking questions. I was wrong about him, I was wrong about you, I was wrong wrong wrong! There, I said it. You happy?"

Tony scoffed: "Brown-nosing won't get you anywhere, Nick. If you think this will make me snap at attention like your precious Rogers, you seriously need to revise my profile. You really want me to help you? You're gonna have to give me something in return."

Fury raised his chin: "Seems only fair. What do you want me to do?"

Tony smirked: "Oh, I don't want you to do anything. In fact, I want you to refrain from doing something. The UN panel is already investigating Romanoff's actions in Leipzig. If I'm bringing her back, you're not gonna protect her from her sentence. She needs to face the music and learn that actions have consequences."

None of the three was surprised by Tony's request. They all knew it was a test: if they just wanted her back to help them continue their shadowy activities, they would refuse, because turning Natasha over would burn her as an asset.

But apparently, Fury actually just wanted her to be saved: "Deal," he said without hesitation.

"Perfect," Tony smiled, clapping his hands, "Let's get this over with. Oh, by the way, I could use some ground support. Miss Carter is coming with me."

Sharon looked surprised: "What? Why me?" she asked.

Tony gave her a look: "I think you know why."

***

The Quinjet was on autopilot, tearing through the skies at full speed as its two occupants sat in absolute silence.

Tony Stark had first met Sharon Carter on Christmas Eve of 1991.

Aunt Peggy had brought him to her house, saying no one should be alone on Christmas. Tony was nineteen, and his parents had died - had been killed - only eight days earlier, eight days he had spent completely alone in the enormous, eerily silent Stark Mansion. He was so grateful to Peggy for getting him out of there.

He entered the living room and found this five year old blonde girl playing. Only she wasn't playing with dolls, like any girl her age.

She was shooting targets on the wall with a nerf gun. And boy, was she good at it too: her posture was perfect, with her shoulders squared and right above her hips, gun held with both hands. Every shot was striking true like an absolute pro.

For the first time in eight days, he felt something other than pain and grief: curiosity. "Hello," he greeted, making his presence known.

The girl turned around and smiled at him: "Hey," she said simply before returning to her targets.

It was weird: kids her age were usually shy, and they didn't greet people they never met before with a 'hey'. 
Tony decided he liked her.

Over the years, Tony witnessed that little girl grow into a determined young woman, even though they rarely met in person. He was always busy, and so was she. Slowly, their acquaintance was reduced to a few meetings and phone calls.

They met after Afghanistan, and she was actually among the first in the world to learn about Iron Man, only a few hours before he gave his infamous press conference.

She tried to contact him after Monaco, but he didn't answer the phone. They met again after Whiplash had attacked the Stark Expo, and she went absolutely nuclear when he told her about the palladium poisoning. He learned later that she had ripped Fury a new one for keeping her out of the loop.

Then, she called him after the Chitauri, and again after the Mandarin. He called after the fall of SHIELD asking her if she was okay. She said no, but with time she would be. And then she texted him when their Aunt Peggy passed away.

The next time they had met in person hadn't been at Peggy's funeral. Tony couldn't be there, he was still too busy with the Accords and the fallout of Lagos. However, they had met later that day in Berlin, at the JCTC headquarters, after Barnes and Rogers had been arrested.

And now here they were, in one of the most awkward situations ever, at least in Sharon's opinion.

Tony actually felt a lot more angry than awkward, truth to be told. Sharon could see it.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally broke the silence: "Hey, I didn't even congratulate you for how well you came out of the German mess. Congratulations! I mean, I know CIA fired you, but hey, you avoided prison! Did you really not leave enough traces for them to arrest you or was it Fury who pulled your butt out of the fire?" he asked in a saccharine voice.

Sharon visibly flinched: "Look, Tony, I know you're angry-"

"Damn right I'm angry!" he snapped, "I'm sure Fury thoroughly briefed you on the entire situation, including what really happened in Siberia, since apparently he always knows everything! I think I have every right to be angry, thank you very much! Especially with you, considering if you hadn't returned your star-spangled boyfriend and his two army buddies their gear, half this mess would never have happened!"

Sharon lowered her eyes: "I'm sorry, Tony. I really am. Steve only told me about five more Winter Soldiers and I-"

"And you looked into his ocean blue eyes and fell for the 'Captain America is always right' bull. Isn't an agent like you supposed to know better? He had already laid waste of a German task force in Bucharest, what did you think he needed his shield for, exactly?"

"He told me these super soldiers were in Siberia. Not exactly the place with the highest population density in the world, is it? For God's sake Tony, we're talking about Steve Rogers! Captain America! We both grew up with his stories, he's considered the best tactical genius of all time! Surely he could assess a situation better than me!"

"Yeah, tactical genius until he hears the word 'Bucky'. Then he becomes just a big, retarded puppy!"

"How was I supposed to know that? I mean, five more Winter Soldiers? I was there when Project Insight was about to launch! I saw with my own two eyes what a single Winter Soldier can do! Five
of them? It scared me shitless just thinking about it, Tony!"

"Whatever. Doesn't excuse how you acted. I was there at the JCTC! You could have come to me! But no, you were too busy fangirling over Captain America."

"You were operating under the Accords. Steve said there wasn't time to-

"And yet he had the time to pick up three more people for his little boyband, all of which from the other side of the Atlantic!" Tony seethed, stepping into her personal space, "You know what he used that shield for in the end, right? Do you want me to show you the armor? I sat there freezing my ass for almost twenty-three hours, with five broken ribs, a punctured lung and a cerebral edema! I was about to fucking DIE!"

His eyes were starting to glow orange. Sharon was visibly scared: "Tony..." she muttered, eyes wide. That seemed to quell his rage. He stepped back and raked his hands through his hair.

Sharon steadied herself: "I'm sorry. I-I didn't... I made a mistake, and I'll try to make it up to you, if you'll let me. We wouldn't have come if we could do this on our own."

"You know the Accords don't force us to act if we don't want to, right? We're getting Romanoff back, then Fury can go fuck himself. I'm way too busy to deal with his problems on top of my own, so next time, he can stuff his authorization up his ass. I'm an Avenger, not a SHIELD agent. And even if I were he still wouldn't get to order me around like a minion, considering the way SHIELD ended."

That triggered an unexpected reaction: Sharon stalked up to him and grabbed him by his shirt, slamming him against the jet's bulkhead: "You don't get to say that!" she yelled.

Tony didn't have the time to react as she immediately continued: "SHIELD was all I had! Ever since I was four years old I only wanted to join it! When I graduated at the Academy it felt like I had found my purpose in life, like I finally was where I belonged! Do you have the faintest idea of how I felt when suddenly it all turned out to be a lie!?!" she raged, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

Tony just held her gaze. He was still bitter, very bitter, and very close to react to the physical aggression, but he realized he wasn't the only one who had suffered.

In the end, Sharon calmed slightly. She let him go and looked down, ashamed: "I-I'm sorry. I overreacted. It's my problem, I shouldn't take it out on you. I'm sorry." she said, stepping back.

Tony nodded and took her hand: "I know exactly what it feels like. Living in a lie."

She just lowered her head even more: "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Tony. Nobody should ever have to deal with something like that"

"No need to be sorry for that, Sharry Bear. It's not your fault."

She didn't react to that old nickname she absolutely loathed. They didn't talk again for the rest of the flight.

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"You hear me, Sharry Bear?" Tony called, enveloped in his suit.

"It's 'Agent Thirteen', Tony. You know how much I hate it when you call me Sharry Bear," came
"Copy that, Sharry Bear Thirteen," he answered with a sly smile.

She let out an annoyed groan: "Are you in position?"

"Affermative. Wait for the fireworks to start before you get in," he replied.

Their target was an abandoned warehouse in an industrial area in Youngstown, Ohio. Tony's infrared scanners had detected twenty-three heat signatures inside. One of them was sat down and hunched over itself: that had to be Natasha. There were also four men on the outside, guarding the two entrances.

Tony was going to get in from the front door and blew people up left and right. Hopefully this would provide enough of a diversion for Sharon to extract Natasha with relative ease. Otherwise, he would just terminate everyone in the building and then get Natasha out.

He took out the two guards on the outside before even landing, then smashed the big front door. That's when the unexpected twist came about: inside the building, everybody was armed with modified Chitauri weapons.

"Thirteen, do not engage! They have alien weaponry!" he barked through the comm.

"And leave all the fun to you?" came her response. He heard gunshots and then the noise of metal scraping over metal, then she spoke again: "Not a chance, Iron Man."

Tony rolled his eyes. I can see why Rogers likes you, he thought while attacking the first two henchmen.

He smashed them like nothing. He was still fighting without using Extremis, but the Hitman suit was already showing what it could do.

The next three men were hidden behind some crates. He fired a missile from his left forearm and their little hideout was blown to smithereens. Two of them were already out of commission, and the third met the same fate a few seconds later when Tony jumped over the wall of fire and rammed his armored fist on the man's throat.

Then he became the target of concentrated fire from three different directions. An energy blast caught him in the chest, very close to the reactor, making him stumble backwards.

Red warnings blared on his HUD showing the area that had been hit. He panicked for a moment - that hit so close to the armor's heart brought up unwanted flashbacks.

Get a grip! This isn't Siberia!

In that moment, he missed having Friday's voice in his helmet. She would have caught up on his distress and reported that the hit hadn't damaged anything. She would have brought him back from the brink of that panic attack in a second, but she wasn't there.

Get it together, dammit!

Through sheer will, he focused again: All systems are fully operational. Now finish the job.

He shot one of the three guys that was firing at him, making his Chitauri bazooka blow up in his
hands. Then he flew up until he was right between the other two. The goon on the left fired, but Tony ducked and the shot hit his colleague. Iron Man then proceeded to dispatch of the third guy too.

Really, it was almost too easy. How did Natasha get captured by these idiots?

He could hear gunshots from the other side of the warehouse: Carter was introducing herself to these guys, apparently. Again he wished Friday was here: she could pinpoint Sharon's location and tell him if and when the former SHIELD agent needed support. However, he had other priorities right now.

He spotted Natasha in the middle of a big, open space. She was tied on an office chair, shoulders hunched and head bowed forward, her long red hair partly obscuring her face. She was barefoot and covered in grime, wearing pants and a tank top that were tattered and filthy. Her right ankle and left forearm were bent in an unnatural way. *Definitely broken.* There was also a rather sizeable gash on her right thigh that was bleeding profusely.

"Carter, I have eyes on Romanoff" he called while shooting another of Mason's men.

"I see her too! She's too exposed there! She could get in the line of fire!" Carter yelled back.

Right then, the last three men bearing Chitauri guns and a fat guy that Tony immediately recognized as Mason moved close to Natasha and immediately started to untie her. Tony shot down two of the goons but the third immediately returned fire, forcing him to dodge. Sharon promptly took the shooter out while he was distracted by Tony.

That left only Mason.

Unfortunately, he had already untied Natasha and hoisted her up by the hair, using her body as a human shield and holding a gun to her temple.

Normally Tony would have laughed. First of all, a corpulent guy like Mason hiding behind Natasha's petite frame was just ridiculous. Second, it was Black Widow he was using as a hostage. Pretty much a guarantee for a painful and humiliating demise.

But that was also the reason Tony wasn't laughing at all.

Natasha should have been able to kick Mason's substantial ass all the way to Asgard and back. Yet there she was, not reacting at all to Mason's manhandling, barely able to stand or even keep her eyes open. She wasn't even favoring her injured leg.

Tony took a better look at her conditions: she had a black and purple bruise from her right cheek to her jawline, her lower lip was split and bleeding and her right eye was almost swollen shut. On top of that, she was sweating profusely and her eyes were glazed and unfocused. They had probably drugged her.

Sharon slowly circled them, her 45 raised and a murderous expression on her face, like a tiger ready to attack, until she was ten feet from Mason to his right. But the fatso had his eyes locked only on Iron Man.

"Stand back! Stand back or I'll shoot her!" he yelled, his voice broken by fear. The general appearance of Mark 47 could have that effect: Iron Man's faceplate forged in a permanent scowl, the reactors and eyes of the suit glowing menacingly in the dimly lit warehouse and the new paint job were doing wonders in causing involuntary reactions in Mason's amygdala. It also helped that Tony had effortlessly plowed through all his men like a bulldozer.
"That's right. Tremble, you fat bastard."

"I said stand back! Don't you move or I swear to God I'll blow her brain off!" Mason bellowed, getting more and more nervous by the minute.

Tony's posture relaxed visibly: "Go ahead" he said calmly.

Mason's eyes widened: "W-What?" he blurted.

"Go ahead," Tony repeated, "Be my guest, shoot her skull open, see if I care. She's lied to me so many times I've lost count. Last time she double-crossed me my best friend ended up in a wheelchair. You really should have chosen a better hostage" he explained in a colloquial tone.

Mason lowered his gun slightly: "What are you-"

BANG!

Sharon hit him in the temple and Mason fell dead to the ground. Natasha fell forward, and slowly curled herself in a ball, cradling her broken arm with pain written all over her face.

Tony looked dispassionately at Mason's dead body: "Poor guy. Apparently Thirteen was your unlucky number."

Sharon holstered her gun and went to help Natasha: "Alright Nat. Easy" she whispered, helping her slowly into a sitting position.

Iron Man's helmet retracted, showing Tony's face: "Hey Nat" he greeted, crouching next to her.

It took her a very long time to answer: "Hey Tony" she rasped in a barely audible voice.

"What happened to not needing to watch your back?"

She didn't answer this time, closing her eyes. Tony shook his head, and Sharon, for all her SHIELD training and the fact that she knew him since she was five, couldn't even begin to speculate what he was thinking in that moment.

He simply took Natasha in his arms and brought her back to the Quinjet.

Chapter End Notes

To me, Sharon Carter is possibly the least stupid and most redeemable of Team Cap. But it still doesn't mean Tony should simply pat her shoulder and tell her that all is forgiven... so here we have them having 'The Talk'.

I'm saving Tony's confrontation with Natasha for the next chapter. I had originally planned it in this one, but it was getting too long and it works best if there's a chapter for Tony and Sharon and one for Tony and Natasha.
Chapter Summary

Natasha and Tony talk. Friday surprises Tony in the lab.

Chapter Notes

So, here we have it. Tony facing off with Natasha. This chapter isn't really plot thick, but there are a couple of twists that will change things a bit...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After several days of torture, Natasha had finally allowed herself to pass out during the flight back to the Compound, right after Sharon had stabilized her. When she woke up again, she was in the facility’s infirmary.

Fury and Hill were staring at her from either side of her bed with matching unreadable expressions. It was the ex-director who spoke first: "Kidnapped by a computer nerd? You've sunk to a new low, Romanoff..."

She shook her head: "I know, it's embarrassing. But he wasn't working alone. He had at least fifty men with him, and they were all armed with Chitauri weapons," she answered.

"We know. Stark and Carter took care of that," Fury informed her.

She really didn't want to do this debriefing right now: "What did they do to me? I don't remember anything..."

It was Hill who answered: "Your left arm was broken in four points, your right ankle in two. They cut your thigh pretty badly, but luckily they missed the arthery. Then of course they beat you like a drum. Oh, and pumped you full of drugs: we found Ruphylin, Pentothal and all sorts of other nasty stuff in your bloodstream. It's a small miracle in and of itself that you didn't die of overdose."

It made sense: she felt as if all her muscles were on fire with pain and she had a splitting headache. She took a second to check on herself: her arm was in a splint, her thigh had been treated and dressed but blood was already seeping through the bandages in red dots; it would need to be redressed soon. Her vision was still slightly blurry, and even moving a single finger sent excruciating pain through her entire body.

Fury spoke next: "The question now is why they did it. What could you have that a guy like Mason could want?"

Hill's face darkened: "They injected you with truth serum, Romanoff. Clearly they were after some sort of information you have, or that they thought you have..."

Natasha's head was hurting. Everything about her kidnapping was a blur. She licked her lips, trying
to moisten them: "I-I don't know. I don't remember."

"Romanoff."

"I'm serious. I don't remember anything."

Fury held her gaze for a few moments more, before nodding: "Alright. Rest for a bit, maybe you'll remember something more. Then we will."

He was interrupted by the door opening.

A deadly serious Tony Stark entered calmly: "You two, get out. I need to speak with Romanoff." he ordered.

Hill started to protest: "Stark, this is-"

"This is my Compound and neither of you has any authority anymore," Tony stated, still completely calm but absolutely serious, "which means either you leave this room right now and wait outside until I'm done, or I put on the armor and show you the exit myself. And in that case it will be the exit not only of the infirmary, but my property altogether." he said matter-of-factly.

Hill's face was priceless: eyebrows raised and mouth open like Tony had never even thought was possible for her. Fury was more stoic, but it was clear he was unsettled by Tony's determination too.

He had always been the one in control. The one giving orders. And he had always managed to convince Tony to do what he wanted, but this time... this time it was clear that he was not gonna have it his way.

He slowly moved out of the room. Hill hesitated a bit more, looking at Natasha and only leaving when she gave her a little nod.

When the door closed, Tony and Natasha stared at each other for a long moment.

She was expecting rage. Contempt. Harshness. But right then, Tony was absolutely unreadable. He stood at the end of the bed, staring her down with his arms crossed. His face was completely relaxed, as if he was above the whole situation.

When he spoke, he was eerily calm: "Barnes killed my parents. Rogers knew it. I've had some time to think and I figured out he must have learned the truth during the fall of SHIELD two years ago."

Natasha was one of the best secret agents of all time. She was famous all over the world for her nerves of steel and how she was always in control of her emotions, but when Tony slowly moved to the side of her bed, brushing his fingers on her injured thigh, he threw her completely off her game. She had never seen him in this 'quiet rage' state, she didn't know what to expect and she didn't like it one bit.

She was never going to admit it, but he was starting to frighten her. She thought only Fury could pull that off. Clearly, she was wrong.

Tony then spoke again: "You were there with him all the time when that happened, so I assume you knew about my parents too, am I right?"

For the first time in forever, she couldn't find it within herself to lie: "Yes" she admitted.

Tony nodded. Something else appeared on his face in that moment. Something that very closely
resembled disappointment: "Did you find out together?" he asked then, looking at his hand over Natasha's thigh.

She shifted uncomfortably: "Yes" she simply repeated.

Tony kept his gaze on the wound and pressed on: "Why did you never tell me in two years?"

Natasha flinched, averting her eyes from him: "I thought Steve would tell you when he was ready."

Tony's eyes zeroed in on hers again, narrowing ever so slightly. His hand flattened on the wound, caressing it softly over the bloody bandages, not hurting her, but sending a clear warning: "Do not insult me" he said, his face darkening even more.

"It's the truth, Tony," she insisted, not moving a single muscle: "it was his best friend who did it. I didn't want to put pressure on him."

"You didn't want to put pressure on him. Right." Tony repeated, as if to try to convince himself that was an actual reason, "You also didn't think I deserved to know. You didn't want to inconvenience Rogers, he didn't want to inconvenience Barnes, but neither of you could be bothered to give me closure." His voice was slightly strained now.

"I did it for the team. I wanted us to stay together."

"I deserved to know," he interrupted harshly, growling, "I had the goddamn right to know. But obviously I wasn't important enough for any of you. As long as I kept my wallet open and my mouth shut, everything was fine", he stated simply. His hand stilled on Natasha's wound. He still wasn't hurting her, but somehow he was scaring her a more than a squadron of Chitauri.

"No, I- Tony, you're my friend."

"Am I?" he interrupted again, "A friend would have told me immediately," he seethed, leaning forward, "a friend wouldn't even think to keep a secret like that from me, indefinitely, and only spill after two years and after... everything that's happened."

After a long pause glaring into her eyes, Tony finally straightened and removed his hand from Natasha's thigh.

Now that she saw he wasn't going to hurt her, she wasn't scared anymore, but she didn't relax in the slightest. She wasn't scared, she only felt upset and guilty.

Tony had only one more question: "Let me ask you this: if it were Barton's parents instead of mine, would you have just kept your mouth shut?"

She didn't answer. She didn't even look up at him.

"I thought so." Tony finished, turning to leave.

"Stark," she called him back. He didn't turn back around, only looking at her over his shoulder.

"After SHIELD fell, the Avengers were all I had left" she explained, still not looking at him, "I didn't want them to be torn apart too. That's why I signed the Accords, but that's also why I didn't tell you, and why I had to let Steve go in Leipzig. Neither of you was backing down, I was looking at the unstoppable force hitting the immovable object. If we kept fighting, someone would have died. I had to do it. I was wrong to blame you, but... I was scared."
"Rhodey has to relearn how to walk because you were scared" Tony seethed.

She seemed to get even smaller than how she already felt: "I messed up. I know I did. Fury asked me how a bunch of computer nerds got the jump on me... it's because I was off my game. Normally I could have gotten out on my own, but... I was compromised. I thought I had lost all my friends."

Tony scoffed: "You know, it would be nice if I could believe you. Really. But how can I possibly trust you? I thought you had my back, and you jumped ship right when I needed you the most. Even now, I don't know if you're sincere or if you're just going to stab me in the back again."

She wanted to protest, to say that it wasn't fair, but really, it was. Tony had every right to be upset. He had every right to accuse her.

"What can I do to make it up to you? What can I do to convince you?" she asked instead.

Tony finally turned to face her: "As we speak, the Accords Committee is deciding what disciplinary actions to take with you. So you're staying here until you've recovered, and then whatever they sentence you to, you abide by it. No shortcuts, no tricks, no shifting the blame. Do that, and I might consider trusting you enough to be on this team again. Refuse, and the Avengers are done with you. Forever." he said, leaving the room before she had a chance to answer.

Left alone, Natasha rested her head on the pillow, staring at the ceiling.

***

Tony felt like he had just taken a little weight off his chest. It wasn't nearly enough to get over this whole 'Civil War' ordeal, but it was a start.

He headed for the lab: he needed to tinker a bit to unwind.

When he got in, the sight took him by surprise: Friday was there, hovering mid air wrapped in what looked like the inner frame of an Iron Man suit. DUM-E and U had their robotic arms raised towards her, DUM-E holding a fire extinguisher and U a camera.

"Friday?" he called with an incredulous voice.

She turned towards him too fast, losing her balance: "Whoa! No no no no no!!" she squeaked, stumbling mid air for a few seconds before unceremoniously crashing on the floor, behind one of the desks. To complete the deja-vu, DUM-E proceeded to douse her in a generous quantity of fire foam.

Tony immediately ran to her: "What on Earth are you doing?" he asked.

She looked like a child caught stealing biscuits: "Well... I'm kind of... sort of... building a suit?" she confessed while he helped her up.

"Yeah, I can see that. And why exactly are you building a suit, if I may ask?" Tony inquired.

"Well... you know, to... go with you on your next missions?" came the answer.

He just raised an eyebrow, too stunned to speak.

It was Friday who talked first: "One of my primary directives is to protect you at all costs, Boss... when you took off with Agent Carter, and I wasn't linked to the armor, I felt absolutely useless... and if something had happened to you, I don't know what I would have done..." she explained, looking down at her feet with a miserable expression.
Tony didn't know what to say.

She was still so young...

Sure, Vision was ten minutes old when they had boarded the Quinjet for Sokovia to go fight Ultron. But Vision was an android made of the strongest metal on Earth.

Spiderman was fifteen years old, and he brought him to Germany to fight against Cap and his team. But he had told the kid to keep his distance, and anyway he hadn't expected the situation to escalate the way it did.

Yes, biologically speaking, Friday's body was twenty years old, but she had been active for less than a year and a half...

And there was also another problem: "If you do this you would need to notify the Committee-

"Actually, I've already done that," Friday blurted out, "we discussed my directives during my registration hearing... if I get cleared for action, they know it would be to fight alongside Iron Man" she explained, still looking down.

He wanted to reply, but he wasn't sure he could. She had a point: her directives were to aid him and protect him. He could rewrite her computer code, but would that rewrite her brain too?

And was it right to do so? The Spider-kid had told him why he wasn't waiting till he was eighteen to be a superhero. Didn't that logic also apply to Friday?

"Boss... are you mad?" she asked, finally raising her eyes to look at him.

"No, baby girl. I'm not mad. I'm just... taken aback, is all. And maybe a bit worried" he answered, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"I'm worried too when you suit up, Boss... I was so scared when I lost you in Siberia..." she answered.

Tony took a better look at her: the frame of the suit fitted her body like a glove. He could see all the internal mechanisms, and it was all built perfectly. He noticed the Extremis superchargers, half concealed behind every reactor: "Are those giving you trouble? You have less Extremis than me, after all" he asked, pointing at the supercharger right behind the main reactor.

She smiled a bit: "I know... I made them less powerful than yours. Working at a lower capacity..." she explained.

Tony smiled back.

***

"I just don't know what to do, Pepper..." Tony said that night, when both of them were in bed.

"I think you should let her come with you" she answered. Tony stared at her incredulously: "What? I thought you would flip your lid at your 'daughter' going out to fight big bad guys!" he said.

"I can't deny that I'm a bit scared. I'm also scared when you go out to fight, Tony. But I can't stop you because that's part of you, and it's much the same story with her. Plus, it actually makes me feel better knowing you two have each other's back out there."

Tony was once again stunned. But her reasoning was undeniable.
That convinced him: "Alright then. I'll take her with me."

"Of course, it goes without saying that if she gets hurt, I'll tear you a new one" Pepper warned him.

"I know. But would you do the same with her if it was me who gets hurt?" he asked.

"Nah. She has 'protect Tony Stark' written in her code; if you get hurt she would already feel miserable enough without me blaming her for it" Pepper teased.

"Not fair" he answered with a fake pout.

***

The video call was connected, and Shuri's face appeared on the screen: "Mr. Stark," she greeted.

"Princess Shuri," Tony greeted back.

"I wanted to inform you of the Committee’s decision regarding Friday: she is cleared for field duty without further examination or training required. She will be assigned to the Avengers as soon as she signs the Accords. She can sign online and her registration will be complete." Shuri said.

It was good news, but Tony felt like there was more: "That's good to know. But you could have just sent me an email to inform me... is there anything else you wanted to tell me?" he asked, trying to be respectful.

Shuri's expression darkened visibly: "As soon as you notified the panel of having rescued Natasha Romanoff from her kidnappers, I informed my brother, the King. Upon receiving the news of the Black Widow resurfacing, he decided to exonerate her for the assault on his persona in Leipzig."

Well.

Tony wondered why T'Challa had changed his mind. Or rather: who made him change his mind.

_Fury doesn't have any sort of pull on T'Challa. It must have been Rogers. After all, only him, Barnes and I know T'Challa helped them in Siberia..._

Tony had discovered the Black Panther had been in Siberia after going through the base's security footage. T'Challa had brought Zemo to the JCTC claiming he didn't encounter anyone else in Siberia, but the external cameras of the base told a very different story.

He wasn't sure Rogers and his crew were still in Wakanda, but really, where else could they be?

Rogers didn't have to blackmail T'Challa. He probably didn't even have to ask him to withdraw his accusations. Hell, it was more than likely he didn't even know anything about Natasha being kidnapped and then freed; no one had released anything to the Press yet.

But the simple fact of being in Wakanda as a fugitive from the very Accords that nation was supporting so passionately, gave him enough leverage to persuade the King. T'Challa would want to keep the situation as calm as possible.

_Even the Black Panther wouldn't want to deal with what Steve could do knowing one of his ass-kissers is being 'unjustly accused', not after seeing what he's capable of._

"Without my brother's testimony, the Committee has cleared Miss Romanoff of personal assault charges, and only sentenced her for abetting fugitives," Shuri continued, pulling Tony out of his thoughts. Her tone was clearly spiteful, not doing anything to hide her personal opinion on the
matter: "The sentence is two years of house arrest in a location she will indicate, and that has to be approved by the Committee" she explained.

Tony snorted, his expression and tone almost a perfect match of Shuri's own: "I'll inform her of the Committee's decision" he said.

"It's been a pleasure, Mr. Stark."

"Likewise, Princess Shuri."

The call was ended.

Tony leaned back in his chair, mulling the situation over.

Presumably, Natasha would have to spend her sentence at the Compound. There was no way the Committee would approve wherever it was that Fury was running his business from as a viable location for house arrest. Same story for the various ex-SHIELD safe houses they had.

Natasha had nowhere else to go, the Compound was her only option.

He was tempted to refuse to keep her there, just to be spiteful and force her to go to prison. But after debating that option for a while, his practical side rose above all else: having Natasha around could be useful for a number of reasons, chief among them personally making sure she didn't run into hiding again, and also finding out why in the blazes Mason had grabbed her... not to mention, he wasn't exactly above watching her slowly go claustrophobic after being locked in the same place for two years.

God, he was starting to think like Fury.

Chapter End Notes

About T'Challa not framing Natasha: I think of it as a continuation of his reasoning at the end of the movie. First, he was running off with murderous rage and, his words, he almost killed the wrong man. So, seeing the errors of his ways, he decided to be diplomatic and house Steve & co. But now he's stuck between a rock and a hard place, 'cause if he presses charges against Natasha, Steve might do something stupid which would lead to the world learning that international terrorists are hiding in Wakanda, and things would go to shit from there. So yeah, not the best situation to be in for our dear Panther.
"Friday?" Tony called while entering one of the Compound's living rooms.

She was sitting on the couch, reading one of Vision's cooking books. She closed it and looked up at him.

"The Committee says you're cleared" Tony smiled.

"Yes!" she said, pumping both fists in victory, "So now I just need to sign the Accords?"

"Yep. You can do that online..."

She raised her eyes to the right for a moment, squinting: "I'm reading the form on the UN website right now... What's my last name?" she asked.

Tony smiled fondly: "Stark. Your last name is Stark" he said. Then he added: "Do you want a second name too?"

She considered the idea for a moment: "I wouldn't mind it... do you have any suggestions?"

He did: "What about Ana? Do you like it?"

"As in Ana Jarvis?" she asked.

He nodded: "She was a great woman. You remind me a lot of her... 'specially with your 'Protect Tony Stark' directive. I think it's fitting" he said with a fond, nostalgic smile.

"Friday Ana Stark..." she tested the name on her lips, "I like it." she decided before remotely signing the documents.

Tony felt like the smile was permanently plastered on his face. But the idyllic moment was broken by a disheveled Sharon Carter barging into the room: "Natasha has remembered something... the Bartons are in danger" she said breathlessly.
They all ran to the infirmary.

When they arrived, Natasha was trying to get out of bed. Fury and Hill, and even Rhodey and Vision were all there, all with a worried expression on their faces. Evidently they were all trying to convince Natasha to stay in bed, without much success.

"Where do you think you're going?" Tony asked.

"Laura and the kids are in danger," she answered. She had gotten into a sitting position and was gingerly trying to stand: "I have to-"

"You have to lie down and stop being ridiculous" Sharon said, walking to the bed and pushing Natasha back down by her shoulders.

Natasha, however, was determined. She protested: "Guys, please, I can't let them-"

"Dammit Natasha, you have to think! You have an arm and an ankle broken, your right thigh was cut to the bone and you were filled to the brim with drugs! What's your plan, you wanna borrow my wheelchair? Just tell us what happened and let us deal with it!" Rhodey insisted.

Natasha winced. Borrow his wheelchair.

She was the one who caused him to be injured, after all.

And yet, somehow he was still concerned for her.

She finally relented: "It just came like a flashback... when I was being interrogated, a man asked me where Clint kept his family... I resisted as much as I could, but then they used Pentothal..."

"Alright, I'm on it. Friday, fire up the Quinjet." Tony said to the girl, who immediately left the room. Then he got back to Natasha: "Can you tell me anything else?"

She squinted, trying to concentrate: "That man... I don't know, I haven't seen his face, but... he sounded familiar."

"Familiar how?" Hill asked.

But right then, Tony also had a flashback.

'You're all grown up, you have a wife and kids... I don't understand, why didn't you think about them before you chose the wrong side?'

He had said that to Clint in the Raft, before shutting down the audio.

And Ross had been listening.

"Fuck..." he murmured.

They all looked up at him. Vision gave voice to everyone's question: "What is it, Mr. Stark?"

Tony ignored him. He stalked in front of Natasha: "Could it be Ross?" he asked abruptly.

Everybody had been stunned into silence by that question. Everybody except Natasha. She squinted even more, trying to make the connection, before her eyes bulged in concern and realization: "Yes! Yes, it was his voice!"
"Mother fucker!" Tony exploded, "I'm gonna blow his sorry ass into space this time!" he growled.

"I'll go with you. You can't keep me here..." Natasha insisted.

Tony brought his attention back to her: "Oh, I can and will. I actually have to. The Committee has sentenced you to two years of house arrest," he told her, "so unless you have another place to go, you better get used to your surroundings, 'cause you'll be staying for a while." he finished.

Natasha was stunned: "What? When did-"

"Ten minutes ago," Tony answered, "I was about to come here and tell you. So now it's up to you if you want to accept my conditions or not." He leaned forward before continuing: "It's your last chance, Natasha. If you blow it, there won't be another one," he said.

When she didn't speak, Tony got back to the situation at hand: "Cover for me?" he asked Rhodey and Vision. Both nodded their agreement.

"Aren't you supposed to be authorized by the Accords Committee for rescue missions?" asked Hill with an air of superiority.

"Rescue missions? What rescue missions?" Tony answered with a mischievous grin, "I'm just paying Laura Barton a visit" he said while leaving the room.

***

The Quinjet was ready to take off. Sharon was piloting, Friday waiting for Tony on top of the loading ramp, already suited up in her new armor, minus the helmet.

It was the first time Tony saw her in full armor. The delicate, feminine, and yet somewhat sinewy curves of the suit exuded an aura of both elegance and power. The reactors, glowing light blue, contrasted perfectly with the armor plating's color scheme: hot rod red and ivory white, complimenting the red and gold of Iron Man.

It was a gorgeous piece of tech. If Tony was honest with himself, he was actually looking forward to see it in action.

"I'm trying to contact Mrs. Barton," Friday said, "her phone seems to be disconnected."

"Then we gotta hurry, I don't like this." Tony responded, "Punch it, Sharon."

The Quinjet's ramp closed and the wings unfolded while the aircraft was taking to the skies. In a few seconds, it was gone.

***

The Quinjet Tony had built for the Avengers was one of the most sophisticated aircrafts ever built, but even with its amazing speed, it was gonna take over forty minutes to get to Barton's farm. And they didn't know how much of a headstart Ross had on them.

"So Ross was the one paying for Mason's work... he took Natasha to get the location of Barton's family..." Sharon pondered while trying to reach their destination as fast as she could.

"Looks like it... which could be a big problem for us," Tony answered.

"Why is that?" the blonde agent asked.
"Mason had replicated the technology of the Chitauri weapons," Tony explained, "and Ross is a major bastard, but he's not stupid. If he's attacking Laura Barton, he probably expects some sort of reaction from the Avengers, Accords or not..."

"So you're saying we should expect Chitauri weaponry when we arrive?" asked Friday.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Tony muttered.

"Heads up guys, we're almost there," Sharon warned, "ETA: three minutes."

***

When they arrived, Ross was already attacking.

The house was on fire. A Chinhook CH-47, a double-rotor troop transport helicopter, had landed about fifty yards from the front porch, and at least two dozen men in black tactical gear were surrounding it. Three more helicopters were circling in the sky over the farm. Tony immediately recognized them as Apache gunships.

A little overkill to kidnap a housewife, two pre-teens and a toddler. Ross knew he would probably have company.

"Alright ladies, it's showtime," Tony announced, "Sharry Bear, stay in the jet and deal with those choppers. Friday, find me some Bartons," he said while Mark 47 closed around his body.

"Be careful, Boss," Friday said before her helmet came up from her suit to cover her head.

"You too, baby girl," Tony answered, his own helmet closing in place.

Right then, one of the choppers noticed them and got into a firing position before shooting a missile. "Hold on!" Sharon shouted before expertly avoiding it. The missile flew past the jet, but then veered to get back on target.

"They have heatseekers!" came again Sharon's voice from the cockpit.

Tony lowered the rear ramp and shot a repulsor blast that destroyed the missile before it could come too close. The explosion rocked the jet, but Sharon quickly reacted, immediately stabilizing the aircraft before lowering the minigun under the nose of the Quinjet and returning fire in kind.

The helicopter tried to dodge, but it was nowhere near as manoeuverable as the Quinjet. A small explosion right behind the main rotor set it on fire, before it started to spin and lose altitude. It exploded dramatically halfway on its descent and crashed right next to the barn.

This first scuffle gathered the attention of the rest of Ross' forces: immediately all the foot soldiers started to target the Quinjet, and so did the two remaining Apaches.

Tony and Friday immediately flew out, joining the dogfight. Tony noticed the foot soldiers were shooting at the jet, the biggest and slowest target. And of course, they were shooting Chitauri laser beams.

*Here we go again. This Chitauri thing is getting boring,* Tony thought before landing in the middle of the group and starting to take down people left and right.

"Boss, I think I found the Bartons," Friday chimed while she destroyed two more heatseeker missiles with her repulsors. She then faced one of the Apaches: a tank missile appeared from her left forearm
and was fired against the chopper, blowing it to pieces.

"I'm detecting heat signatures inside the troop transport. One of them is very small and other three seem to be struggling. Then there are nine other people, in all probability Ross' soldiers." she reported.

"Alright, copy that. Good work, Fri" Tony commended, before grabbing one of the goons and pulling him in front of himself right when another shot him.

The last four soldiers on the ground were shot down by a volley of high calibre bullets coming from above. Two seconds later, Sharon landed the Quinjet right behind their dead bodies, looking at Tony from the cockpit and giving him the military salute.

"Obliged, Agent Thirteen," he quipped responding to the salute. Right then, the third and last gunship crashed behind him in a ball of flames. Tony barely had the time to register it happening as Friday landed right next to him in Iron Man's signature three-point-crouch.

"Are you mocking me?" he asked flatly. Friday stood up and looked at him. She could picture his 'really?' face even through both their helmets: "...nooo?" she answered with way too much mirth in her voice.

"Well well well, what do we have here?" came a familiar voice from the big helicopter, while its propellers started to turn, "You're acting in violation of the Accords, Mr. Stark. And you too, young lady. I think I'm gonna have to arrest you both."

Saying that, Ross emerged from the side door of the helicopter clad in a dangerous looking armor. Its main colors were dark grey and mimetic green, with hints of glowing purple on the arms, legs and chest. In his left hand, he held what looked like a faceplate for his helmet, whereas his right arm ended in a big, scary-looking laser cannon.

"Boss, that thing is definitely Chitauri tech..." Friday said.

"Yeah, I noticed," he answered in a low voice before addressing Ross: "What about you, Mr. Secretary? Shouldn't that thing you're wearing be registered?"

Ross ignored the question: "Do you like it? I call it 'Thunderbolt'. What can I say, you inspired me." he said raising his arms slightly so Tony could have a better look.

"Well, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery... Of course, some of us can do it better than others" said Friday with contempt.

"It's a wedding present from your late buddy Phineas Mason, right?" Tony mocked: "Let me get this straight: you need a Chitauri armor, an entire death squad and three Apache helicopters to kidnap a housewife and three kids? Do you really suck this badly?"

Ross just sneered before putting the faceplate on his helmet. Behind him, the helicopter started to take off.

"I could have taken them an hour ago, Stark. I was just waiting for you. To show you that your services are no longer needed" he said.

Sharon was also taking off in the Quinjet, starting the pursuit.

"What do you want from them?" Tony inquired.
"From them? Nothing. From Hawkeye? His team," Ross explained, "I will get those fugitives back. The Committee will see that I can get results!"

"Friday, get the Bartons. I got this", Tony said. The girl immediately took off. "The Committee will see that you're insane", he retorted to Ross.

"Not if I leave no witnesses" he grunted before attacking.

***

Sharon could easily follow the Chinhook, but she couldn't stop it. The Bartons were inside.

But right then, Friday surpassed her and reached the side door of the chopper, tearing it clean off its hinges and stepping inside. Six men were there to keep guard on the Bartons. She dropped them all in precisely five seconds.

When she turned around towards the family, all of their eyes were as wide as saucers: "What- there's a female Iron Man now?" Laura breathed, bordering a hysterical attack.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Barton. Don't worry, we-" Friday started before one of the pilots came into the cargo bay with an assault rifle. Friday shot him dead before he could even take aim: "As I was saying, don't worry, we are here to get you out and transfer you to the Avengers Compound. Miss Romanoff is very concerned about your wellbeing," she explained.

Laura was still scared out of her mind, but she caught her wits: "So Irish female Iron Man," she said, catching Friday's accent despite everything and nodding nervously, "Yeah, okay. Makes sense."

Friday smiled: "I'm from New York, actually. Alright, everybody come here!"

A few seconds later, Friday flew out of the helicopter with the entire Barton family holding onto her for dear life and screaming their lungs out: "Agent Thirteen, it's all yours" she said calmly. Sharon opened fire, and the Chinhook exploded.

Friday and Sharon landed at a safe distance, not too far from where Tony and Ross were still fighting.

***

Thunderbolt whacked Iron Man on the side of the head, sending him crashing to the ground some sixty yards back, before firing a laser beam. Tony sidestepped the blow and retorted with one of his own, but Thunderbolt was almost as heavily armored as Mark 47. The repulsor blast just bounced off Ross' chest.

Clearly, this was going nowhere. It was time for the trump card.

Ross was laughing: "So? Who's got the best armor now, Stark?"

Right then, Tony engaged the Extremis superchargers. The reactors, repulsors and eyes of the suit went from their usual light blue to Extremis' typical fiery orange: "I do," seethed Tony leaping forward.

Ross tried to punch him, but Tony dodged and hit him in the abdomen so hard Ross stumbled back three steps. Tony kept on the offensive, punching and firing repulsors at Thunderbolt. One last punch threw him back at least one hundred feet, his armor dented and scraped in various places.
Tony spoke as Ross slowly got back on his feet: "Aren't you overexerting yourself, Teddy? Come on, with a triple bypass, you should look after your heart a bit more..."

Ross was enraged: "I will end you, Stark!"

"You'll die trying," sneered Tony in response.

That was when Ross spotted the Quinjet to his right. The Bartons were rushing inside, while Friday was covering them, standing in front of the closing ramp of the aircraft, facing him.

"No! You're not gonna take my prisoners!" screamed the General.

Short wings and two miniature jet engines sprouted out of the back of his suit, and he took off towards the jet. Tony took off immediately after him, determined to stop him.

Thunderbolt aimed his hand cannon at the aircraft and fired, but Tony and Friday's reaction was instantaneous and lethal: the girl returned fire with a full power, Extremis-supercharged unibeam that countered Ross' blast and hit his cannon, destroying it completely, while at the same time Tony fired a tank missile from his arm, blowing the corrupted General off the sky.

Ross was dead before he crashed to the ground.

Tony landed next to the smoking, charred corpse: "Yippee kay-yay, Mr. Secretary," he said icily.

***

When Laura stepped out of the Quinjet at the Avengers Compound, Natasha was there to wait for her. Her arm was in a sling and she was leaning heavily on a crutch. Her eye was still black and swollen, but it was slowly starting to get better.

Laura stepped up to her carrying Nathaniel: "My God... did you get the number plate of the truck that ran you over?" she asked, her voice broken and her eyes glassy.

"Yeah. Thaddeus Ross," Natasha answered before they hugged. Cooper and Lila hugged them too in the moment Tony disembarked.

'Thank you', Natasha mouthed to him.

Tony simply nodded.

Chapter End Notes

So, I took a Hulk villain and turned him into an Iron Man villain. And then I killed him. I don't regret anything, but I hope you liked it!

BTW, if you didn't get the 'Yippee kay-yay' reference, you should really watch more Bruce Willis movies.
What happens next

Chapter Summary

Tony's confrontation with Ross causes several different reactions in several different people.

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter was a bit of a nightmare to write because of all the different people in it, including the one and only Hope Van Dyne, who appears in this story for the first time. I hope I've done everyone justice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Son of a bitch!" Laura yelled, "This is all his fault!" She had her hands in her hair and she was on the verge of crying. Crying again.

Natasha couldn't stand to see her friend like this: "Laura, please-"

"No, Nat," Laura interrupted her, "He left us to go fight a losing battle he was never meant to be part of! I've always respected him, never said anything when he was called for a mission in the middle of the night. I had fully made peace with the idea that one day a government agent could step up to my door and tell me my husband had been killed or was missing in action. You know why? Because he was doing something good! He was fighting for what was right! He sure as hell wasn't fighting against the United Nations!"

Pepper, standing silently in a corner of the room, was amazed by the strength this woman had shown in the years she was married to Hawkeye. Laura was - well, at least she had been - very much in her same situation, with the man she loved risking his life on a regular basis. Actually, with three kids to look after, Laura was in an even worse spot. Pepper thought she could learn something from her.

It was Tony who spoke next though: "Maybe he did believe he was doing what was right," he said, "We don't know what Rogers told him." He couldn't believe he was defending Barton after their last exchange in the Raft.

Laura, however, wasn't placated in the least: "Oh, but I do! Rogers told him you were keeping Maximoff prisoner. He told him to break her free and join him in Germany, that they had a mission! And my retired husband snapped at attention and fucked off to become an international terrorist!"

"Mrs. Barton-" Pepper started, but Laura interrupted her: "Was it even true?" she asked, looking at Tony.

"Was what true?" he asked, not getting the question.

"That you had Maximoff imprisoned. That he had to rescue her" Laura clarified, almost pleading Tony to tell her that it was. That Clint hadn't left his family behind for nothing.
Tony lowered his gaze: "It is true that she was confined here in the Compound. It was a safety precaution to avoid problems after her mission in Lagos. But she wasn't exactly imprisoned. She could go anywhere within the Compound's perimeter, and the Vision had actually convinced her it was for the best if she didn't leave. It was Clint who convinced her otherwise," he said. "It was my fault, really. I should have sat down with Maximoff and told her why it was better if she remained out of the spotlight until I fixed things. But I had to run to Berlin after Rogers and Barnes were apprehended. I owe you an apology, Mrs. Barton."

Laura seemed to calm slightly: "You don't owe me anything, Mr. Stark. Maximoff's mess wasn't yours to fix, you weren't even an active Avenger at the time. And you definitely don't have to answer for Clint's stupid-ass decisions. If anything, I'm the one who owes you. You saved me and my children..."

Tony's cheeks flushed slightly: "Well, not... not me personally... it was Friday who got you out," he stammered.

"Nevertheless, you came when we needed help. Unlike some other people," she added with spite, "So please, no more Mrs. Barton. Actually I'm not gonna be Mrs. Barton for much longer. Me and my children owe you and Miss Friday our lives, at least call me Laura."

Tony looked up at her, smiling slightly: "Only if you call me Tony."

She smiled back: "Will do, Tony."

***

Fury was preparing to leave the Compound. Romanoff was finally safe, but for the next two years, she wouldn't be much of an asset. Never mind though, the situation had been dealt with.

He had come here only trying to rescue Natasha. Stark had done a lot more, finding out who had grabbed her and why, and putting an end to the whole deal. Not to mention, Tony was handling the media fallout of it all like the champion he had always been.

Back when the Avengers were just an idea, he had thought Stark was going to be a wild card that needed taken down a notch. He couldn't have been more wrong.

He was going to the landing pad where Hill was prepping their helicopter, when Carter's voice stopped him: "Sir?" she called.

He turned around and eyed her briefly: "You part of a military unit, Carter?" he asked.

"Uh- no, Sir..." she answered uncertainly.

"Then why are you standing at parade rest?" Fury jabbed, noticing her military stance. No wonder her and Rogers had hit it off. She was possibly more of a soldier than he was...

Sharon's posture slumped slightly: "It just seemed appropriate..." she said.

Fury turned fully to her: "What can I do for you, Sharon?"

She went straight to the point: "Tony offered me a place as backup for the Avengers. I accepted."

Fury narrowed his eye. Sharon winced slightly under her ex-CO's analytical gaze, but then, the Colonel smiled: "Well, aren't you guys growing up..."
Sharon was confused: "Sir?"

"Nothing, Carter. I'm happy you found your place," Fury smiled, patting her shoulder, "You're gonna have fun here."

Sharon was slightly stunned: "Uh... Okay? I thought you would-"

"Be mad at you because you're leaving? Nah. You're a hell of an operative, Carter. And you'll be in the field a lot more with the Avengers than with me. Besides, I'm sure Director Carter would be happy, seeing her niece and godson teaming up..." he said with a small smile.

Sharon smiled back: "Thank you, Sir."

Fury nodded once more and left.

As he boarded his helicopter, Maria Hill starting the engines, the smile was still on his face.

Look at Tony now, all grown up and taking charge. The Avengers were still recovering, but with Stark at the helm, they would be fine. Of that, he was sure.

***

Sharon was still thinking about what Fury had said, when she entered the common room. Friday was there, arms crossed and leaning against the wall. It was obvious she was expecting her.

"So you're staying?" the girl asked.

Sharon squared her shoulders: "Yes," she answered, "I'm staying..."

Friday nodded, looking around the room for a moment before looking back at her: "You know, Boss trusts you..."

"Does he, now?" Sharon scoffed, but Friday's tone remained absolutely serious:

"Too many people he trusted have stabbed him in the back. I don't know if he can stand another one..."

Sharon looked her straight in the eye, understanding perfectly what she meant: "I already told him I'll try to make it up to him. I meant every word."

Friday nodded: "I'm glad we understand each other, Agent Carter."

***

Four days later, a discussion was taking place at the Compound.

"What about Rescue?" Cooper asked.

He was sitting in one of the Compound's living rooms with Friday, Lila, Natasha and a newly arrived Peter Parker. The two Barton kids were engrossed in trying to find Friday a superhero name, and they had dragged Natasha into their quest sometime during their brainstorming. Peter, who was at the Compound for a visit, had also joined them.

"Why Rescue?" asked Friday.

"Well, it was your first mission and you rescued us," Cooper explained, "hence Rescue."
"I like it," said Tony, coming into the room, "You even called those who rescued me in Siberia" he finished.

"It makes sense, but she can do so much more than rescue missions..." Peter imputed. Him and Friday were actually forming the beginnings of a beautiful friendship.

"Your armor makes you look like a lady-knight," said Lila with excitement, "What do you think of... Lady Iron? Do you like it?" she asked with hopeful eyes.

Lila Barton used to have one heroine: Natasha Romanoff. In the last four days, however, she had decided she now had another one, right beside Natasha. Now, if she was ever asked to choose her favourite between them, she would probably answer 'both'. She had a thing for fierce warrior redheads, sue her.

Friday's eyebrows rose slightly, as if she had just had a illumination: "Lady Iron... yes, it has a nice ring to it... I think I'll go with that."

"Doesn't that make you sound like Tony's sidekick?" Natasha joked smirking childishly at Tony. She was probably expecting him to pout at her or something, but the look he gave her clearly showed that he didn't find it funny: "Is there a comment about my ego on the way, Romanoff?" he asked acidly.

Natasha winced. Obviously he still hadn't forgiven her. It was still way too soon to resume trading jabs like in the good old days. Natasha's smile dropped as she looked down.

"That's exactly the point," explained Friday, diffusing the tension, "I am the Boss' sidekick. It's written in my computer coding. I'm practically purpose-built to be his sidekick."

Tony felt his heart swell as he smiled. Maybe it was written in her code, but it didn't take away Friday's free will. "I liked Rescue though," he said, "Maybe I'll use it somewhere someday..."

"But she likes mine more," retorted Lila with a look of smug satisfaction, "so Lady Iron it is."

"Fair enough. Lady Iron," Tony smiled holding out his hand to Friday, "Welcome to the Avengers."

She smiled back and shook his hand.

"Well, that's just not fair," Peter whined, "why does she get to be an Avenger from the get go, but I have to wait till I'm eighteen?"

Friday rolled her eyes at Peter's antics: "I'm biologically twenty, Spiderling" she answered smugly.

Peter only stopped sulking when Friday put an arm around him: "Besides, you know the Avengers have you on speed dial for backup support. That's gotta count for something right?"

He looked up at her and smiled, all tension gone from his system.

***

After Tony had held a press conference about the recent events, the news of what had happened at the Barton farm had spread throughout the world in an instant. Ross had acted in violation of the Accords, kidnapping Natasha Romanoff and using questionable interrogation techniques on her to find out where the Rogue Avengers had been hiding. However, he was stopped by Iron Man and a random girl who used an armor just like his and went by the name 'Lady Iron'. While a good portion of the media immediately started to make speculations about Lady Iron's true identity, the rest went on to dissect Tony and Ross' confrontation.
Ross had been backed up by a veritable horde of criminals. One of the henchmen killed in the confrontation was Jack Rollins, one of Crossbones' old work buddies back in the STRIKE team. Obviously, not wanting Tony to expose his allegiances and methods to the world, Ross had attacked Iron Man, with... less than success.

At first, the public opinion had had mixed reactions, but when it became known that Iron Man had taken care of the situation, actually enforcing the Accords Ross was supposed to represent, the support behind the document started to grow even more.

When the news reached Wakanda, Clint exploded like a firecracker.

"I wanna know what happened!" he yelled.

"Clint, calm down" Sam tried to interject, but it was no use.

"Calm down, Sam? Calm down!? Haven't you seen the news!? Ross has gone insane and leveled my house! And Stark went there to duke it out with him Western Duel style! Four destroyed helicopters, three of which Apache gunships! And not a single word about my family!"

Scott looked sympathetically at him. He, too, had a daughter that could potentially be in danger. He didn't even want to think about Cassie being the next target in Ross' plans.

"No one knows about your family, Clint..." tried Steve.

"Stark knew. And he was working with Ross, wasn't he?" Wanda chimed in.

"I swear to God, if he so much as touches my family, I will kill him with my bare hands!" Clint vowed.

Steve didn't answer this time. To him it was obvious that Tony was protecting Clint's family by not mentioning them to the Press... wasn't it? Clint was a spy, he probably knew this sort of things better than him... but would Tony really sink so low as to hurt or kidnap Clint's family?

The TV was still turned on, showing images of Ross' funeral. It wasn't a big ceremony like an Army General would normally get: no guards firing salute salvos, no American flag wrapping the coffin. It was a very low-key funeral with very few people attending. Probably what you get when you become a criminal.

That was undoubtedly a fitting demise for a disgusting person. A woman that Steve recognized from Bruce's personal file as Betty Ross stood in the first row, arms crossed and looking at the coffin with a serious, cold and detached expression.

Clint was still going: "I want answers! I want to- no, I need to know if my family is alright! They could have been killed in the crossfire for all I know! And if they weren't, Stark has them! I need to know where they are!"

Steve suddenly got up from his chair: "Hang on, I gotta make a call." he said simply.

"Wait... a phone call? We can make phone calls?" Scott asked.

Steve ignored him and also the questioning looks all the others were giving him and left the room.

He went back to his quarters and retrieved the burner phone he kept so Tony could contact him in case of emergencies. Well, this was an emergency, and a phone went both ways.
He speed-dialed the only number saved in the phone and brought it to his ear. It started ringing. And ringing. And ringing.

_Come on Tony... pick up the phone..._

He didn't. Steve tried calling again four more times, with the same result.

He sighed. So many thoughts came and went in his mind, so many possibilities which he pondered and inevitably excluded. He knew the only way to know what had really happened was to find out themselves.

***

"I'm sorry, but my decision is made, Captain," T'Challa spoke with all the authority his role of king gave him. He had to play this right: maybe at the end of this discussion, this problem would be solved. He already had to exonerate Black Widow to avoid a diplomatic incident, but this time it was different.

Steve tried to negotiate: "Your highness, you don't understand-"

"You are the one who doesn't understand," T'Challa interrupted him, "Wakanda is one of the staunchest supporters of the Sokovia Accords. My father was one of the driving forces behind them. I cannot grant you sanctuary in my country and at the same time leave you to do as you please, crossing international borders without permission and act in complete defiance of international law."

"Does that mean you're not letting us leave?" Wanda then spoke up. Her tone was absolutely disrespectful and she knew it. She also didn't care in the slightest.

As a matter of fact, in that moment T'Challa wanted to kiss her: "You are free to leave Wakanda if and when you wish," he answered, "I will arrange a secure transport that will take you to any destination of your choice. You will not, however, be allowed to return should you choose to leave. That is not how political asylum works." He was really hoping that they all actually did wish to leave, just like her. If they did, Wakanda would no longer be in danger of being sanctioned by the United Nations.

"Alright," Steve interceded, "we understand your position and we don't want to cause any trouble to you or your country. We won't come back, if that's your final word."

T'Challa schooled his expression in a solemn gaze, but inside, he was whooping and doing cartwheels of joy. However, his exuberance was short-lived as Steve continued: "If you can just wake Bucky up, we'll be on our way."

The king eyed him warily: "That decision is not yours to make, Captain. It was sergeant Barnes who chose to be put in stasis until his conditioning could be broken. You cannot dictate when he has to awaken."

Steve wasn't going to back down on this point: "With all due respect, your highness, neither can you. When Bucky chose to be frozen he thought we could stay here indefinitely. Now we have to leave, so the situation has changed."

For several seconds Steve and T'Challa seemed locked in a staring contest. And it was the king who yielded first: "Very well. This is a personal matter, after all. Sargeant Barnes will be pulled out of cryostasis at once so he may decide himself."

As he led the fugitives to where Barnes was kept, T'Challa had to fight very hard to conceal his
relation. He had definitely made a mistake extending asylum to the captain's crew, but in a couple of hours, these people wouldn't be his problem anymore.

He didn't know of the burner phone Steve had sent Tony.

***

Tony was sitting in his office at Stark Industries in LA, and he was pleased with himself.

It had been easier than expected to cover up the Barton's existence, thanks in no small part to the fact that the Committee delegates were too embarrassed to ask too many questions after one of them had turned out to be a criminal.

Friday's voice came in through the desk phone: "Boss, Ms. Van Dyne is here."

It was amazing how his baby girl was still working perfectly as his secretary, especially considering she was physically at the Compound right now. Probably sleeping, given the different time zone.

"Yeah, send her up, Fri."

A few seconds later Hope Van Dyne, clad in a black business pantsuit, entered the office: "Mr. Stark. Such a pleasure" she greeted formally.

"Pleased to meet you too, Ms. Van Dyne. Please, have a seat," he answered cordially, standing up and shaking her hand.

When they were both sat in front of each other at Tony's desk, he continued: "I gotta admit, I was... well, slightly baffled, to be contacted by Pym Technologies."

Hope smiled: "Our fathers have history, Mr. Stark, I'm not denying that. But I'm not my father, and I'm told you're not like your father either. I think you and I could cooperate in a way that would bring mutual benefits if we could leave the past behind us, wouldn't you agree?"

"Oh, absolutely," said Tony with a smile, "although I was led to believe you didn't wanna talk to me about Stark Industries or Pym Technologies?" he queried, going straight to the point.

Hope appreciated that in people: getting to the point without beating around the bush. She leaned back slightly in her chair: "I'm in possession of a piece of technology that you became familiar with during the clash of the Avengers in Leipzig."

Tony raised an eyebrow: "You mean that tiny-giant suit?"

Hope gave him a sly smile: "Indeed. Only mine is more advanced. Flight, for example, is an added ability."

Tony leaned back in his chair too: "Intriguing. Go on."

"Scott Lang is using the Ant Man suit to break international law. As CEO of Pym Technologies I cannot allow our intellectual property to be used for terrorism. I'm sure you understand."

Boy, he did: "I suppose this is where you ask me if you can join the Avengers."

Hope smiled again: "Yes, after we have established a couple of conditions."

Tony opened his arms: "I'm listening..."
"First of all, the Ant Man suit and the Wasp suit are, as I said, intellectual property of Hank Pym and Pym Technologies. That means they are completely off limits for everyone else." Hope said with a hint of warning in her voice.

Tony scoffed: "Ms. Van Dyne, I've spent a good part of my first year as a superhero keeping the Congress away from my armor. I know full well how it feels when they try to take away your toys. We have a deal on that. What's the other condition?"

She produced a photograph from her purse, a picture of two adults and a little girl: "Jim and Maggie Paxton with their daughter, Cassandra Lang," she said.

Tony nodded slowly, becoming serious: "Lang..." he repeated.

When Hope spoke again, there was disgust in her voice: "Scott Lang left behind a daughter and an ex-wife when he became a terrorist." she explained, "They are to be left alone. No one has to know about them, and should they be threatened, I want the Avengers' help."

Great. Another Laura Barton. What kind of people had Steve called on his team?

"We can guarantee their protection in case they need it" he assured.

Hope nodded, satisfied: "Can I join the Avengers, Mr. Stark?"

Tony smiled: "We'd be happy to have you, Ms. Van Dyne."

They shook hands and went over a few formalities before Hope left.

When she was out of the door, Friday spoke again: "Um... Boss, you have five missed calls..."

Tony frowned, checking his phone: "I don't see any missed calls..."

"That's because they are on that... other phone, Boss" she explained.

Oh.

If Steve was calling him, it was probably for Clint. They had probably heard of Ross at the farm.

Tony found that he didn't care: "Give the phone to Laura, Friday. Explain her what it is and tell her to do with it whatever she wants."

When Friday answered, she did so with an amused tone: "Aye aye, Boss."

***

Bucky stared out of the window at the ocean spreading for miles and miles under the jet.

He was not very sure he made the right choice.

After all, even if he was a super soldier, he was still missing an arm. That had significantly hindered his ability to fight. Not to mention the tiny little detail that he had done precisely zero steps forward in getting free of Hydra's conditioning.

But when Steve had told him he had to leave Wakanda, he couldn't just turn his back on him. He was his best friend, and even in this new century, Steve was too stupid to stay away from a fight. Only now it wasn't just a bully who would beat him up. Nor was it a bunch of Nazis who would simply shoot at him.
Now they were wanted fugitives. The enemy could be everywhere. In a coffee shop, looking at them from the corner of the eye while pretending to read the newspaper. On the streets, walking behind them and talking at the phone. Looking at them from the shadows, preparing to attack.

Steve wasn't ready for that, but Bucky had lived in those shadows. Steve would need him now more than ever.

And yet, while he looked at the immense ocean below him, he thought he would give anything to go back to his crappy apartment in Bucharest.

Chapter End Notes

And thus, after Ross has been dealt with, a new, explosive confrontation starts outlining on the horizon. How long before Team Cap crosses paths with the Avengers again?
(Not long. I'm telling you now: really not long.)
Laura twirled the black flip phone in her hands, trying to decide if she wanted to use it or smash it with a hammer.

She had loved Clint. They had three kids to prove it. And yet, now that she was miles away from their destroyed farm, she couldn't remember what made her fall for him.

They were supposed to go water skiing.

His old life was supposed to be over. He was supposed to hang his bow to the wall and finally think about his family. But one phone call from Steve Rogers had shattered that illusion, and Clint had disappeared once again.

She knew that it wouldn't be another phone call to get him back. Rogers would be the one to answer this phone, if she were to call. And even if Rogers then put Clint on the line, he would not come back; not if that meant leaving poor little Wanda Maximoff to fend for herself in the big, cruel world. And even if Clint did agree to come back, he was a terrorist now. He would have to face a trial that would probably land him in prison for God knew how many years. Cooper, Lila and even Nathaniel would be all grown up by then. Grown up without their father. Regardless of if she used this phone or not.

It wasn't worth it.

She had made her decision. She went to Tony's workshop and knocked on the door. He was there, apparently working on another armor: "Laura. Can I help you?" he asked.

She handed him the phone: "I'm not gonna use it. Take it back." she told him simply.

Tony looked at the phone, than at her: "I'm not gonna use it either."

"Then throw it away. I don't want it."

Tony hesitantly took the phone. As soon as it was out of her hand, Laura turned around and left.

Tony sighed. Why was he still keeping that thing around?

In the end, he took out the battery and the SIM card and threw everything in his vault, right next to
Steve's- no, his father's shield.

***

"This is the conference room," Sharon said. She was showing Hope Van Dyne around the Compound: "every decision regarding the Avengers and the Accords gets discussed here."

When Fury and Hill had left after Natasha's rescue, and Sharon had decided to stay and work with Tony and the Avengers, she had wondered what Tony's motivations were for offering her not only a job, but also a place to live, even though she was paying him a small rent. She supposed that, with only four active Avengers, Tony was trying to get whatever help he could.

Sharon wasn't technically in the Avengers roster. For now at least, she was just field backup, only piloting the jet and intervening in case of emergency.

She might not be Black Widow, but twice already she had proven her worth: in Youngstown when they had rescued Natasha and at the Barton farm against Ross. Tony could recognize skills when he saw them.

Again, Spiderman had protested: if him and Sharon were both backup, why did she get to go on every mission and he didn't? Tony had managed to placate him pretty quickly, however, by 'officially promoting him as the team's technical support consultant'. Peter's protests had promptly died a quick and painless death.

Hope was actually impressed by the sheer size of the facility, considering that, counting her, there were only four active Avengers at the moment.

"As per your request, the private quarters Mr. Stark has assigned you in the Compound have been fitted with biometric locks that you will have to code yourself with the handprints and retinal scan of everyone you want to be authorized for access," Sharon continued, "the same goes for a section of the armory where you can store your gear. If you would follow me-"

"Sorry to interrupt," Friday said entering hastily the conference room. "we have a situation. A group of terrorists have a nuclear powerplant in Pennsylvania under siege. Seems like they are ready to blow it up." she finished.

"What do they want?" asked Hope, already mentally preparing for battle. "You're not gonna believe this," Rhodey sighed, coming into the room with Vision and Tony. He had finally gotten rid of the wheelchair, and he now walked using either Tony's braces or, like in this occasion, a pair of crutches: "They want full pardons for Captain America and his team. They say they can't trust the actual Avengers to protect the world 'cause we're tied by the Accords. They say only real heroes can get the job done, not those, and I quote, 'UN pussies'. Fucking Rogers just keeps being a pain in the rear even when he's not around anymore." he finished, shaking his head.

Friday spoke again: "The US Subcommittee has contacted us. I'll put General Sawyer on the screen" she said while they all sat down at the conference table.

Tony sat at the head of the table, Rhodey took the seat to his right, Friday to his left. Vision sat down next to Friday, while Hope and Sharon sat on Rhodey's side of the table.

Lieutenant General Daniel Keith Sawyer, a no-nonsense Army senior officer from North Carolina, had recently been appointed head of the Sokovia Accords US Subcommittee after the old one had left the place vacant to replace Ross in the main panel. His face appeared on the screen: "Mr. Stark. I imagine you heard the news" he greeted with a crossed expression.
Tony nodded once: "We did, General. Though we do not know the details."

The General resettled slightly on his chair: "Eighteen minutes ago, a group of armed terrorist has invaded the Susquehanna Steam Electric Station in Berwick, Pennsylvania. They killed two technicians and locked down the entire complex"

"Has anyone engaged yet?" asked Rhody.

"No," Sawyer answered, "we have two Navy SEAL teams in position and on standby, but everyone's waiting for you. This seems rather personal for the Avengers."

Tony scoffed: "Yeah, I got that impression too."

Sawyer leaned forward: "The United States of America do not negotiate with terrorists. You're authorized to eliminate the threat by any means necessary. These scumbags think the Avengers are ineffective because of the Accords. Show them how wrong they are," he ordered.

Tony's face twisted in a satisfied smirk: "With immense pleasure, General."

Sawyer nodded before ending the call.

"Well, that was easy" Hope commented, impressed by how quickly they had been granted permission to act.

"Yeah. Sorry to get you out in the field on your first day, Wasp," Tony addressed her, "but this is exactly the sort of mission where your shrinking abilities can come in handy. Gear up, people. We take off in five."

***

The Susquehanna Steam Electric Station was built right next to the Susquehanna river. Sharon landed the Quinjet on the shore, on the side of the river opposite to the plant, and cut the engines.

The place looked absolutely calm: the power plant was still functioning perfectly, white smoke emerging from its chimneys, but on the outside the facility was completely deserted.

"Okay, so how are we doing this?" Hope asked, clad in her black and yellow Wasp uniform, as they exited the jet. Tony immediately answered her: "There are thirty-seven hostages, according to the latest reports. You're gonna shrink down and look for them. Friday and I can help you with the infrared scanners, but if they're keeping them close to the reactors we won't be able to spot them; the nuclear cores produce too much heat. You think you can drop a man with those stingers?" he asked pointing at Hope's arm guards, which were crackling with electricity like Widow Bites.

Hope scoffed: "Is the Pope Catholic?" she retorted sarcastically.

"Good, then when you've found the hostages start taking down the terrorists." Tony concluded. He then turned to Vision: "You can phase through walls and are immune to radiations. I need you to examine the reactors and search for any explosives near the cores. If you find any, disarm them and remove them."

Vision nodded. Tony then addressed Sharon: "You coordinate with the SEALs. We need an extraction unit ready for the hostages in case we get too tangled up with these guys."

"Alright, I'm on it," she answered while Tony turned to Friday: "You and I are the diversion. We stay here on standby, and if Wasp or Vision get spotted before they can do their thing, we draw fire
away from them and keep the hostiles busy while they remove prisoners and explosives."

"I'm ready," Friday answered.

"Alright, let's get to... wait" Tony interrupted himself.

He noticed a shadow drop from the sky towards the building and then disappear in the distance very quickly.

"What? What is it?" asked Hope.

Tony's helmet came up, and he scanned the point where he saw the movement with his infrareds. Sure enough, there seemed to be a scuffle there. He didn't even have time to open his mouth when two seconds later, the Falcon appeared in the sky, landing on top of the complex and firing at a terrorist that had just come out of a door on the roof.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" Tony shouted.

Hope eyed him: "What did you see?" she asked again.

"Rogers is here," Tony said, "and he's barging in guns blazing."

"What!? Are you sure?" she demanded.

"We got Falcon on the roof" Tony confirmed. His helmet retracted and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

_God damn it Rogers! You don't just charge in like a steamroller in a hostage situation! Especially inside a nuclear facility! It's one of the fucking basics! What the fuck is wrong with you?_

Now that the terrorists knew they had been attacked, they could blow the plant or kill the hostages at any moment. They had to move.

"Alright, new plan," Tony said after muttering a couple of curses, "Carter, I want the SEALs ready to join the party. Vision, get the explosives. When you're done, deal with Maximoff. Van Dyne, first you take the hostages and then Lang. Friday, the rest of the terrorists plus Falcon and Hawkeye." he said through gritted teeth. Then his face darkened: 'I'll take Barnes and Rogers.'

Everyone nodded in agreement. Tony's helmet came back up: "Move out" he ordered.

***

Bucky was still adapting to the new arm.

After leaving Wakanda, they had had to gather new resources. Everybody except Wanda needed weapons, and he needed a new arm. Even Steve had been forced to admit that life had been easy before, with the financial and technological backing of Tony Stark. Now though, that bridge had been burned to the ground.

_Because of me_, Bucky thought.

Steve would never say it out loud, but Bucky just knew he had hoped T'Challa would step in and fill the tech void Stark had left. Pretty wishful thinking, considering how the Sokovia Accords should actually have been called the 'Wakanda Accords'.

Back at the time when Bucharest, Berlin, Leipzig and then Siberia had happened, Bucky had been
completely out of the loop. He had heard these documents mentioned once or twice in the news, but nothing more. Once in Wakanda, however, Bucky had learned that the very country they were hiding in had been the first to propose a regulation system for the Avengers and other enhanced individuals, as far back as immediately after their stolen vibranium had been bought by Ultron.

However, Stark and the Avengers were not short on detractors. They had managed to find someone who was both rich enough and competent enough to provide them with tech and money under the table without being discovered.

This guy seemed to be a Captain America fan. He had built Steve a new uniform, with a gauntlet that created a magnetic field acting just like a shield. He couldn't throw it like the actual shield he had abandoned in Siberia, but it would have to do.

Then he had worked on Wilson and Barton's gear, and somehow he seemed to have mixed feelings about working on Stark-made tech: he spewed insolences left and right, saying how everything wrong with the world could be summarized in the word 'Stark', but even so he was forced to admit - begrudgingly - the technology was amazing. He could run ordinary maintenance, repair it - well, most of it - in case it sustained damage, but it was beyond his ability to improve.

And finally, of course, he had built Bucky a new arm. Bucky thought it was every bit as good as the old one, maybe even slightly better.

That didn't mean he liked it, though.

That arm was a symbol of what Hydra had done to him. That arm was the Winter Soldier's ultimate weapon. If he had to be completely honest, he was actually grateful to Stark for shooting it off.

But he couldn't fight one-armed, so here he was with a new one.

"Is everybody in position?"

Steve's voice brought him back to the here and now: "Winter Soldier in position," he whispered through his earpiece.

Everybody else followed: "Falcon in position"

"Hawkeye in position"

"Scarlet Witch in position"

"Oh- oh yeah, I'm here! Ant Man in position!"

"Alright, let's go," Steve ordered.

Bucky smashed the outside grate with his foot. It caved in at the first kick. He then crawled into the aircon exhaust vent. He had to be careful not to hit the vent walls too hard with his metal arm, or the noise might have alerted the terrorists of their presence.

When he emerged from the vent inside the building, he saw that it wasn't a problem.

There were three terrorists there. All were writhing on the ground, clutching their heads in their hands and screaming unintelligible words. Their eyes were glowing red and their weapons laid discarded on the floor, next to them. Two were foaming at the mouth, clearly having a seizure.

Maximoff's handiwork made him queasy. With all the brainwashing he had withstood over the years,
this sight hit a bit too close to home for his taste. But now it wasn't the time to whine about it: they had a job to do.

Maybe it would have been appropriate to take the guns away from the hallucinating men so they didn't start shooting at their visions, but he had more pressing issues right now than to save a bunch of bad guys from themselves.

Down the next corridor, he met up with Steve and Wanda. Two seconds later, Lang un-shranked out of a keyhole from a nearby door: "I haven't found any hostages yet. They must be on the other side of the plant" he reported.

"They are. One of the guys I took down told me they are keeping them in the canteen," confirmed Wanda, pleased with herself for her good work.

Steve nodded and looked in the direction of the offices: "Alright then. Bucky and I are going there, Wanda, you get to the reactors and get ready to contain the radiations in case they blow them up. Scott, you go with her, she can't fend off terrorists if she's busy containing the reactor's exhaust fumes."

"Copy that," said Lang full of enthusiasm. Then, in a moment, they were on the move again.

They reached the canteen in no time. Steve kicked the door open, ready to fight...

But inside, there was no one.

Bullet holes dotted the walls and tables and chairs were toppled over, clear signs of a fight, but there was no blood or bodies.

"What the hell?" whispered Bucky. He looked around as if to find an answer that he knew wasn't there. Or rather, one that he already knew: "Steve, I think we crashed someone else's party..."

Judging from Steve's expression, he agreed with him. He touched his earpiece: "Falcon, Hawkeye, status..."

"No one outside on the north side of the compound, I'm going in right now," said Barton.

"There's a Special Ops unit on the south side, but it looks like they're retreating," reported Falcon, "They are escorting out several civilians and it looks like they even have some of the terrorists in custody... hang on, I'll try to get a closer look..."

A heavy silence fell on them for about two minutes as Wilson took to the skies again. Then his voice returned, this time panicked: "There's a Quinjet on the other side of the river! The Avengers are here!"

Bucky felt his heart leap in his throat and clog it up completely.

_The Avengers..._

_He's here..._

Steve's eyes bulged in surprise and fear: "Everyone, fall back! Meet at the rendezvous point! Now!"

They ran. They tore through the corridors back the way they came.

One last turn to the right, and they saw the exit. It was a secondary one, just wooden double doors leading to a parking lot.
"Almost there, Buck! We're gonna make it!" Steve encouraged.

He simply smiled in return: it was true. They had found no one so far. They were gonna make it.

But then, a familiar, high-pitched whine tore the silence.

Bucky knew that sound.

Sheer terror enveloped him completely, as his enhanced hearing made that sound even louder and more dreadful.

It was a sound he had grown to fear.

In the last months, it had become part of his nightmares, because it was the sound of one of his victims, maybe the most important one, coming back from the dead and seeking vengeance in the form of his son. A son the Winter Soldier had orphaned.

It was the sound of a repulsor charging up, ready to fire.

*Iron Man.*

The double doors exploded inwards, wooden splinters and wrecked steel flying towards them. Steve activated his magnetic shield and they both scrambled for cover while the debris showered them.

When they looked up, there he stood.

Chapter End Notes

Just to point out: General Sawyer, the head of the Sokovia Accords US Subcommittee, is NOT also Ross' replacement in the Central Committee. The new US representative will appear later on. While Sawyer is an original character, this other person is not...
Chapter Summary

Team Cap has stumbled upon the Avengers. What will happen now?

Chapter Notes

So here we are. It's not just Steve and Tony; other people will have the chance to have a talk with each other... Is it gonna be Leipzig all over again?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve was too stunned to move, speak or even breathe. It was just like Siberia, and yet completely different.

The Iron Man armor looked even more menacing than the last time. Dark gray was covering most of its plating, like a stain of hurt and betrayal.

Back in Siberia, Tony had stepped forward while removing his helmet. He had tried to reason, to help. He had come as an ally. A friend.

But now, while his helmet retracted, he didn't make a single move. He stood in the opening of the door like a stalwart sentinel, blocking their escape to freedom.

Then, when Steve saw his face, another deja-vu reared its ugly head: he was on the third and last Insight helicarrier when he met Bucky- no, the Winter Soldier. His expression back then was just like Tony's right now: detached, cold, like a Great White Shark circling a wounded and helpless prey.

Tony's brown eyes shifted for a moment on Bucky, then came back on Steve. He tried to look for a crack in Tony's expression, a hint of their previous camaraderie, a minuscule flinch to show him not everything was lost, that their friendship could still be saved, That Tony still cared.

There wasn't any.

"Tony..." he tried.

"Rogers," was the polite, professional, hostile answer. Tony's voice was so cold, it felt like a thousand ice daggers being shoved into Steve's body.

"We don't want to cause any problems," Bucky spoke. Steve turned to him: he had his right hand - his human hand - held halfway up in a mostly aborted gesture of appeasement.

Steve noticed how the hand trembled slightly. He's scared too... oh God, Buck...

Instead, Tony's expression didn't waver in the slightest: "Bit late now, Soldat."

Bucky visibly flinched at the name. Steve turned back to Tony at his venomous answer. This was
going downhill fast. He had to do something: "Tony, I... I'm sorry. For everything. I sent you a letter at the time, to try and apologize."

"Oh, I got that letter. And that stupid phone."

*What?* "You... you did? But... I tried to call you-"

"And I didn't want to talk to you. As a matter of fact, I still don't. Can't always have it your way, I guess. The days when you could order me around like one of your minions are over, Captain."

Steve flinched at how Tony had just spat the last word: "It wasn't like that. It was never like that, and you know it. I just wanted to know about Laura, Clint's worried..."

"She's safe. So are the kids. No thanks to you, or him."

Steve decided not to pay attention to the last part of Tony's answer. He drew a deep breath: "Thank you, Tony. I appreciate what you did, really."

Tony scoffed: "Then why are we in this situation?"

Steve knew he was losing ground fast. He didn't want to fight Tony. He got lucky the first time, he wasn't sure he would get lucky again: "Tony, please, we just want to leave. It's not too late to-"

"It's been too late ever since you decided I didn't need to know Leftie here killed my parents, Rogers." Tony cut him off.

Steve's shoulders slouched. He had learned one thing or two from Natasha, like how to look as non-threatening as possible. Now was exactly the time to use that knowledge: "I'm sorry, Tony. I really am. If I can do anything, please, you just have to ask."

Tony's eyes narrowed: "Surrender" he said simply, and then, without even looking at Bucky, he added: "Turn him over."

That was it, and Steve knew it. All three of them knew it.

Steve slowly raised to his full height again: "You know I can't do that, Tony..."

Tony raised his chin: "Alright." was all he said before his helmet came up, enveloping his head again.

Steve and Bucky immediately attacked.

***

"Please! Please, stop! Stop! We're on your side!"

The terrorist convulsing at Wanda's feet had his head in his hands, screaming in pain and anguish as his mind, infected by Wanda's powers, rebelled against him.

"If you're on our side, why don't you want to tell me where you put the explosives?" she growled.

"I-I don't know... I told you, t-they were sup-supposed to be all here... please... i... it hurts... please stop... we are fi-fighting for you! For all of you! To... to have you all pardoned... please..."

Wanda's eyes narrowed and her face contorted in a twisted sneer: "I don't need anyone fighting for me! Least of all someone like you!"
With that, she intensified her hold on the poor guy's mind. He let out an animalistic scream, clawing at his head and thrashing against an invisible enemy. Scott, beside Wanda, took a step back in fear.

"Wanda!"

She completely froze at the sound of that voice, letting go of the terrorist's mind. He promptly passed out from exhaustion.

Turning around slowly, Wanda faced the owner of the voice: "Vision," she greeted in a small, hopeful tone.

"End this madness now, Wanda," the android said, commanding.

"I'm doing the right thing..." she defended herself.

Vision looked down at the tortured man still slightly trembling at Wanda's feet despite being unconscious.

'I can't control their fear, only my own'

He flinched at that memory, before looking back at her: "Torturing someone's mind is never the right thing, Wanda. You are imposing your will on others, and you're doing it without any scruples, pity or compassion. You are acting like a criminal."

"Dude, watch your mouth," Scott said, recovering some of his resolution, "we are looking for the explosives these nuts put around this place. It's the job you guys were supposed to do. Show a little respect."

Vision wasn't sure if this man was being serious: "I have already disarmed and removed all the explosives", he stated simply, "I have already done the job we were supposed to do, Mr. Lang."

Ant Man appeared awkward at Vision's answer, but Wanda narrowed her eyes: "Then why are you still here? Stark ordered you to take us in, didn't he? Why are you still following him like a pet? Don't you see he's putting us against each other?"

Vision's temper was starting to boil: "I have chosen my side, as you have. And on my side, we do not torture people to get what we want. That is what's putting us against each other. And I will not let you continue down this path."

Wanda's powers flared. Her eyes glowed red and her hands were enveloped in scarlet wisps: "You won't lock me up again, Vision. Step aside and let me go."

Vision's eyes narrowed too: "I can't. You must be stopped, Wanda."

She immediately fired her powers at him, aiming for the Mind Stone, thinking that way she could easily overpower him just like she did back in the Compound. But this time, she didn't succeed.

Vision parried her attack with a sort of energy barrier, while the Mind Stone glowed in his forehead: "The same trick won't work twice, Wanda," he warned.

As an answer, she intensified her powers even more. All the lightbulbs in the room frizzled and exploded, leaving the place only lit by Vision and Wanda's clashing powers.

***

Friday had engaged Falcon and Hawkeye. She was sure she could have taken Wilson down in a one
on one fight without even trying too seriously, but that other pest Barton was continuously shooting EMP arrows at her, trying to disable or at least damage her armor.

While she was in the air, of course.

Evidently, these guys didn't care about hurting or even killing them. She was really tempted to stop holding back too, but she didn't want to lower herself to their level. Not if she could avoid it.

Clint and Sam had both heard of her, this 'Lady Iron' character, when they heard the news of the attack on Clint's farm: "Who the hell is this chick?" shouted Sam through his comm while he dodged a repulsor blast.

"Don't know. Probably the new War Machine, since we crippled the old one. Stark must have felt alone without his little sidekick" Clint sneered, shooting another arrow. This one was an explosive with a shrapnel head. It exploded very close to Lady Iron, and most of the shrapnel actually hit her and sent her on a spin.

Friday winced, resettling her stance mid-fall. What little damage the shrapnel had caused to her armor was only cosmetic, but once again she had been forced to break pursuit. She decided she had just about had it with that annoying bugger.

It was time to invert the order. She turned around to attack Clint instead of Sam.

Barton's face contorted in absolute fear as Lady Iron banked to the left and pointed straight towards him. He ran off his perch just as the girl flew over him, shooting a repulsor blast that left a big, blackened scorch mark right where Clint had been one second earlier. Now however, it was Sam who was disrupting her plans, attacking her to distract her from her new target.

***

Iron Man was similarly engaged with Rogers and Barnes. However, unlike back in Siberia, this time it was the two super soldiers who were struggling.

At their first attack, Tony had unexpectedly stepped aside, letting them get out in the open. Immediately, they realized this had been his plan all along.

In Siberia, they had fought in a closed space. Iron Man had been forced to fight hand to hand, unable to use his heavy weapons. But now that they were outdoors, he clearly had the upper hand.

And not only that: somehow, it didn't look like he was going all out. Steve had seen Tony fight no holds barred, and it definitely wasn't a pleasant experience to be on the wrong end of his weapons. But this wasn't that.

Tony was pulling his punches considerably. He was practically playing cat and mouse with them. Probably having fun too.

"Buck, we gotta draw him back inside! Out here we're just sitting ducks for him!" Steve whispered as they tried to take cover behind a minivan in the parking lot. Bucky simply nodded, and as the minivan was blown in two by a repulsor, they immediately ran back to the building. But Iron Man shot a tank missile right in front of them, causing an explosion that completely blocked their escape route and forced them back in the parking lot instead.

Yep, he was definitely having fun.

***
"Stop it, Wanda! We will damage the reactors if we continue like this!" Vision shouted. His warning, however, was completely ignored. Quite the opposite, in fact: Lang chose this very moment to grow to giant size, destroying the roof of the building with his mass.

Vision could not move from his position, having to counter Wanda's attack, and could only watch in horror as Giant Man swung a kick against him.

It hit dead on target.

Vision was propelled more than two miles away, and momentarily knocked unconscious.

***

Giant Man literally growing out of the building had provided enough of a distraction for all of his compatriots to regroup and counterattack. Falcon managed to land a missile on Lady Iron. She crashed to the ground in the middle of the rubble very near to where Vision had been standing only moments earlier, but got back up almost immediately.

That was when she was attacked again.

She had just gotten on her feet and was about to target Falcon again, when all of a sudden she wasn't on the battlefield anymore.

She immediately recognized the place. The half destroyed bunker, the chilling cold, the snow falling outside.

_Siberia._

Her raised hand wasn't pointing at Falcon anymore. It was pointing at the Boss, slouched on the ground, his armor destroyed, blood all over his face.

More blood was also seeping out of the gash on the chest plate. It was staining Captain America's shield, laying next to him. It was all over the floor and walls. There was blood everywhere.

_No... NO!_

She made to run towards the Boss, but then her computers kicked in.

_This is the Witch's doing._

_It's not real._

Friday had a hive mind. Scarlet Witch could get in her brain, but not in her program. She closed her eyes and used all of her processing power to clear her head. When she opened them again, she was back.

She turned around with an arm raised, swinging a backhand trying to hit without looking. She got lucky.

Wanda was struck and fell down on the ground. She looked up at Friday, holding her hurt cheek, abject horror in her eyes: "How? How did you break free!?" she yelled.

"Don't you know some people can resist hypnosis?" Friday sneered. She was about to attack Wanda, but Giant Man had turned his attention on her. Friday was forced to take off before he could land a kick like he had with Vision.
A few seconds later, Lang was finally countered.

Wasp grew to giant size out of nowhere, punching him right in the stomach. Scott hunched forward in pain, and Hope kneed him in the face. It was like watching a skyscraper fall.

Scott jerked back, falling flat on his back all the way through the river, with his head resting on the opposite shore. Hope viciously stepped on his chest: "Sorry I'm late, guys. I was helping Sharon and the SEALs with evac," she said. Then she turned to Scott: "That suit is not yours, you little shit! Take it off!" she seethed, raising her foot and stomping down on his chest again.

She was still pressing down on him when Wanda picked her up with her powers. She tried to throw her in the distance, using all of her power, lips pulled back from her teeth in a strained grimace. But no matter how powerful she was, she couldn't hurl all that mass.

She managed to make Hope lose balance, losing her hold on the Wasp just as she fell backwards like Scott had moments earlier.

***

Tony was still busy with his two targets. He shot a repulsor blast at a car Barnes was hiding behind. The car was blown eighty feet away, taking the Soldier with it. Bucky was left reeling, disoriented and superficially hurt from the explosion and subsequent rough landing. Steve got back on the offensive, but Tony blocked him and punched him in the chest.

All the air was blown out of Steve's lungs, and in a moment the super soldies was on his knees. He was sure Tony had cracked his sternum.

"For the future, that should teach you to leave the reactor alone."

Steve didn't look up as Tony said that, He only managed to get partly upright as Iron Man charged a repulsor, ready to deliver the final blow: "You might want to desist now if you don't wanna leave this place in a plastic bag, Rogers" Tony seethed. Steve's magnetic shield was damaged, he could not defend himself. He couldn't even catch his breath, and even if he was fairly sure his sternum was only cracked and not completely broken, the pain in his chest was excruciating.

Tony had won.

But the tables were about to turn again.

With Wasp momentarily down and Vision still out of position, everybody concentrated their attacks on Friday: first Wanda caught her with her powers and held her still mid air, then Sam hit her with two explosives sending her crashing right against the Avengers Quinjet.

Vision was just returning on site when Clint nocked an explosive arrow and aimed it at the wreckage. He immediately realized Hawkeye's intentions, and he realized something terrible was about to happen: the explosives that he had removed from the nuclear reactors, were stashed inside the now wrecked jet.

"Clint, no!" he shouted. But it was already too late.

Clint released the string and the arrow struck.

The explosion was spectacular. An enormous ball of flames erupted from the destroyed jet, turning almost immediately in an ominous, black mushroom cloud.
Tony turned in that direction and felt his heart skip a beat: "Fri... no... NOOO!!" he screamed, immediately taking off towards the fiery inferno.

Steve didn't know what had just happened, but he took the opportunity: "Everyone, disengage and retreat! Now!" he barked through his comm, his voice pained by the blows Iron Man had inflicted him.

All of his team immediately complied. Scott shrunk back to small size and left the battlefield unnoticed. Wanda and Clint simply ran away, while Sam touched down next to Steve and Bucky to carry them to safety.

Tony didn't even try to stop them. He couldn't care less.

Steve and his team had escaped and Hope could be hurt and Lang or Maximoff could have damaged one of the facility's reactors and Friday's hurt Friday's hurt Friday's hurt please no...

He and Vision both threw themselves through the flames with no hesitation. They found her almost immediately.

Friday was sprawled in the middle of the wreckage, half buried under a piece of bent and twisted metal that was once part of the Quinjet's fuselage. Oh God, no... no no no...

Tony took her in his arms and got out of the fire, gently laying her down on the grass. Her armor was dented in various places, the paint singed and blackened by the flames.

He immediately ripped the faceplate off her helmet while Hope, now back to her normal size, joined them. Friday was unconscious. Unresponsive. Tony was scared out of his mind, fearing the worst: "Fri? Baby girl, please, answer me..." he breathed in a broken voice.

To his immense relief, after a few endless seconds her brow furrowed before her entire face contorted in a pained grimace: "Ouch..." she whined.

Vision felt the need to reassure him: "She is mildly concussed, but I do not detect any serious injury, Mr. Stark."

Tony closed his eyes and exhaled a long breath, collapsing supine on the ground. He stayed there, breathing heavily with his eyes closed, trying to slowly calm himself down.

She's okay...

Thank God, she's okay...

However, he found that, while the gut-clenching fear for Friday was slowly fading, it was being gradually replaced by tremendous, unyielding rage.

When he opened his eyes again, they were glowing with Extremis: "Bastards..." he growled.

You're gonna pay for this.

Chapter End Notes

I know you people are out for Team Cap's blood, but be patient. Now Tony has another
reason to NOT go easy on them >:-) 

In unrelated news... I'm gonna have to change my updating schedule to once every two weeks. Sorry... I have a new job and life is generally getting in the way. But don't worry, I'm not abandoning this story.
Can't hide forever

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the confrontation at the nuclear facility, as both teams regroup, a secret is unveiled in Steve's faction.

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter and the next will deal with the aftermath of Pennsylvania. It was originally a single chapter, but it was getting way too long.

"Ack!" Steve winced. Sam was trying to slowly dress a wound on his shoulder, operation made more difficult and painful because of Steve's cracked sternum: every movement of his pectoral muscles, no matter how minute, caused him to jump in pain, which in turn caused his muscles to contract more, making it even worse.

"Sorry," Sam muttered apologetically.

Steve didn't answer. Nobody really wanted to talk, after what had just happened. First mission back, and it had been against the Avengers.

Scott had had to fight Hope. He had thought she would be on his side, after all Hank hated Stark's guts, and he thought him and Hope were actually building something... instead, the first thing she had done after he'd left was up and join the Avengers. How could she do that to him? To her father?

She had told him the suit wasn't his, while kicking his ass like she had done many times during their training. Well, he had great respect for Hope, but she was wrong. Hank had given him the suit. She couldn't take it away from him.

Wanda was nursing her cheek, where the mysterious girl had hit her, thinking of Vision. He had the Mind Stone in his head! How could he not see Stark was the one responsible for everything that had happened? He had hurt Steve! Cracked his sternum! What could have happened if he had broken it completely instead of just cracking it? Steve could have died!

Thankfully, Clint was there, offering his support. He sat on the couch next to her and put an arm around her shoulders, rubbing her own arm to try and calm her. At least, she still had him.

And Vision would eventually see reason. She was sure of that. If not, she could probably make him, using her powers. She wouldn't like to do it, but she was sure she could. She had defeated him once already, back when she had escaped. She wouldn't like to hurt him or invade his mind, but if she was forced to, she would.

In the end, Bucky was the one who decided that the silence needed to be broken: "Did you see it too?"
'What are you talking about?' Clint asked from where he was sitting.

It wasn't Bucky who answered him, but Steve: 'Iron Man,' he said simply.

'Yeah. New paintjob, I noticed. Liked the old one better. Maybe the gray is a tribute to War Machine,' Scott joked.

Clint scoffed: 'if I were Rhodes, I would deck him for even thinking about it. It's Stark's fault he got injured, and now he thinks a 'tribute' is going to magically make things better? That's just disgusting,' he said while Wanda nodded in agreement.

'It's not about his looks,' Steve stopped him, 'He's stepped up his game. He's stronger. Faster. Buck and I fought him two on one and he batted us around like mosquitoes. By the end, he wasn't even winded. And not only that... I think he was not even fighting seriously. I've seen him go all out, and this wasn't that. He was just toying with us.'

'Yeah,' Bucky agreed, 'He's in a completely different league than he was in Siberia. And it can't be just because he's calmed down after the trauma and he's not in the heat of the moment anymore... Whatever he did to that armor, it's some serious upgrade...'

'Wait... He's calmed down after the trauma? What are you talking about? What trauma?' Sam wanted to know.

Bucky furrowed his brow in confusion: 'You... you didn't tell them?' he asked Steve.

The blond just lowered his gaze.

Bucky looked incredulous for a moment. Then he let out a tired breath and raked his human hand through his hair: 'Dammit, Stevie, you not telling things to your teammates is what caused Stark to flip in Siberia in the first place!'

'I know, okay!?' Steve retorted hotly, then winced again from the pain in his injured chest, 'I just... I didn't want to think about it. It's... Stark isn't the only one who's been traumatized by that video!'

'Okay, cut it off,' Sam interjected, about to lose his patience, 'us common folks don't know anything about what happened in Siberia. Now you two are having this cryptic conversation about videos and Stark being traumatized and we're completely out of the loop. Wanna share with the rest of the class, please?'

'Tell them,' Bucky ordered immediately.

'Bucky-'

'No, Steve. No more excuses. You didn't tell them anything and you let them draw their own, biased conclusions. If you don't tell them, I will. We owe Stark that much.'

There was a very long moment of silence before Steve finally relented. He took a deep breath to try and center himself before he started speaking: 'Tony caught up with Bucky and I immediately after we arrived at the bunker in Siberia. He had come there to help. The three of us, we reached the room where the other Winter Soldiers were being held. Zemo... he had killed them all, long before we got there, each with a bullet to the head.'

'Wait, wait, hold up,' Sam stopped him, 'so these other Winter Soldiers were never a threat to begin with?'
"There was no way for us to know, Wilson," Clint defended, "Steve made the best decisions he could with the information he had at the time."

*If only you knew,* thought Steve.

"But it doesn't make sense! If this Zemo person didn't want to use the soldiers, why did he go through all that trouble to find this random base in Siberia? And why the fuck did Stark attack you two?" Scott whined.

"We played in Zemo's hands all along," Steve resumed, "he knew that in that base, there was video footage of one of the Winter Soldier's missions... specifically a hit, back in 1991. All he ever wanted was me, Bucky and Tony right there, in the same room, while he played that video..."

He couldn't continue. Everyone was waiting for him to go on, but he just couldn't.

Eventually, it was Bucky who mustered up the courage first: "It was a video of me, killing..." he exhaled a deep breath, "killing Stark's parents."

Absolute silence fell in the room. Clint broke it first, stuttering like a moron: "but it- that's not- it was an accident, wasn't it? Didn't Stark's parents die in a car crash?"

"That's what Hydra wanted the world to believe," Bucky sighed.

"That's..." Wanda didn't finish the sentence. She didn't really know how to. She didn't even know how she should feel. There was something so deliciously poetic about Stark having to watch a video of his parents being killed, while he was completely powerless to save them... it was Karma at its best. But she had watched her own parents die; she knew better than anyone how much it hurt. She didn't wish that on anyone. Not even Stark.

"That's fucked up..." Sam completed Wanda's thought: "Christ, no wonder he attacked you..."

"He didn't" Steve breathed in a barely audible voice. He could have avoided telling them this last part, possibly the most disgusting part, but if there was a moment to come clean, it was this one. He couldn't stand keeping it for himself any longer.

They all turned their attention back to him. He didn't look anyone in the eye when he finally talked: "I mean, he moved to attack Bucky, but I caught his arm and he stopped. And then... then he turned to face me. Asked me if I knew the truth."

"And did you?" Sam asked. Steve didn't speak, hunching down on himself even more.

"Steve, did you?" Sam insisted.

"I did."

Sam got up as if he had been burned and started pacing: "Fuck..." he cursed under his breath. After a few moments, he turned to Steve again: "How long?" he inquired.

Steve couldn't get any smaller: "Two and a half years. Since the fall of SHIELD." Both Bucky and Sam appeared shocked.

Wanda, Clint and Scott looked down, all with a similar, solemn expression on their faces.

Sam had to take a few deep breaths to calm down: "Alright, I believe it's time for the obvious question then: why - the fuck - didn't you tell him!?"
"I... I told myself it would do no good to stir up painful memories." Steve answered.

It wasn't the only reason. It wasn't even the main reason, but Steve was simply too ashamed to tell them everything.

Besides, Sam was already angry enough as it was: "Oh yeah, and that worked out dandy, didn't it, Cap? For God's sake, all this time we thought Stark had randomly attacked you two for no reason whatsoever!"

"It wasn't Bucky's fault! He was brainwashed, he didn't have a choice! Tony was wrong to attack him!" Steve immediately retorted.

"He was wrong to attack me?" Bucky asked, "Steve, he had just watched me kill his parents! With my bare hands! What was he supposed to do, offer me a drink!?"

"Dammit Bucky, that wasn't you! You didn't do it! It was the Winter Soldier!"

"I AM the Winter Soldier!!" Bucky yelled, shutting him up: "You live under this ridiculous delusion that I'm nothing more than Sargeant James Buchanan Barnes, 107th Infantry! Well I'm not! I've been the Winter Soldier a lot longer than I've been Bucky Barnes! And refusing to acknowledge that is nothing but an insult, to me and all of my victims! Especially Howard!" he raged.

Everyone was stunned into silence. Bucky just shook his head and left the room, slamming the door on the way out.

"He's right, you know," Sam said. Steve turned to him to protest, but Sam continued: "about Stark attacking him."

"No, he isn't. It's Stark's fault." Clint countered.

Sam was stunned by the rebuttal. He couldn't believe he actually just heard that: "What? How is that Stark's fault!?" he asked hotly.

"I'm sure if Steve had told him, he would have hunted Barnes down. Steve made the right choice," the archer answered evenly.

Scott was quick to agree: "He's right. Stark's reaction in Siberia proves it."

At this point Sam's exhasperation was bordering on hysteria: "What the hell is wrong with you two!? He just saw a video of his parents being murdered by a man standing in the same room with him! How exactly do you think he should have reacted?"

Wanda answered the question in Scott's stead: "He should have seen Sargeant Barnes was only the weapon, not the assassin."

This time Sam was left absolutely speechless. He couldn't even begin to formulate an answer for Wanda's statement.

She went on: "Look, Sam, I know better than anyone here how it feels to watch your parents die. But Stark should have understood that the responsibility for the death of his parents lies only on the person who gave the order, not on the weapon used to commit the crime." she stated. Clint and Scott nodded in agreement.

Steve felt so heartened by their support. Wanda continued: "instead he just threw a tantrum, like a child. He attacked both Sargeant Barnes and Steve, who had absolutely nothing to do with any of it.
And now he's got this new aide, that girl...

Sam really wanted to protest, but the conversation had already changed topic: "The armored chick? What about her?" Clint asked.

"I'm not sure," answered Wanda, "I tried to get in her head. Everything was normal at first, but then... I don't understand. At some point, her thoughts started to feel different... artificial... I don't know how, but she managed to break free of my powers. It's never happened before..."

"Great. She must be enhanced, somehow," Clint pondered, "or maybe she's another one of Stark's robots. Didn't he learn anything from Ultron?"

***

Tony was scraped raw.

He had just concluded two of the most stressing video conference calls of his life. The first was with the Accords Committee, which was - predictably - beyond furious.

The Avengers had done their job at incapacitating the terrorists and evacuating the hostages, but Steve's crew had caused fourteen million dollars of public property damage. It had been only out of dumb luck that Giant Man growing out of the power plant and fighting so close to it hadn't damaged the reactors of the facility.

The Committee was very tempted to just pinpoint Steve & co.'s location and send a squadron of jet fighters to blow them up. Tony had almost had to get down on his hands and knees to convince them to let the Avengers bring them in. Frankly, he didn't even know why he bothered. Maybe for old times' sake. The old times when he used to call Steve a friend.

Or maybe, more probably, he actually believed what he told the Committee: the Avengers were their best shot at stopping Rogers with the least collateral damage possible. Yes, they could bomb Steve's ass back to the Stone Ages if they wanted to, but what if they were hiding in a highly populated area? Yes, they could send a sniper to shoot them in the heads, but how could they be sure said sniper wasn't going to be spotted first and then mind-fucked by Wanda to go on a rampage against civilians?

Instead, the Avengers knew how Steve's crew operated. They had people who could counter the specific abilities of each of the fugitives.

In the end, the Committee had relented, granting him more time. But he knew said time wasn't unlimited.

The second phone call had been to Pepper.

She was in D.C. when he called. She immediately dropped everything she was doing and made a beeline for the airport. Tony almost dreaded the moment when she would land at the Compound. She could be way scarier than the Hulk when she was angry. And when he had talked to her at the phone, telling her their kid had been hurt, well. Her anger put that of the Committee to shame. Thankfully, it wasn't directed at him.

Tony was now outside the infirmary, looking through the window at Friday's sleeping form.

Back when she had first emerged from the Cradle, he had felt blessed. As if she was a gift from that God he didn't believe in. Now, Barton, Wilson and Maximoff had almost taken her away from him.
He clenched his fists at his side. Were they really at the point where he had to defend his own daughter from Steve and his team?

Wait... What did I call her? My-

He was distracted from those thoughts when he heard Peter approach: he was running down the corridors towards him. As he reached his side, he stopped and looked up to him with a worried look:

"I came as soon as I heard," he said breathlessly, "How is she?"

Tony gave him a half smile: "She's had her feathers ruffled, nothing serious. The armor protected her and took the full blow. She has a mild concussion and a few scrapes and bruises. Come tomorrow, and her Extremis will have her good as new."

Peter could see through Tony's mask. He was trying to downplay it, but his hands were still minutely shaking with rage and residual fear. Tony was unraveling at the seams.

Peter nodded and his shoulder relaxed slightly: "Good. That's good." he said placatingly before rubbing the back of his neck: "And... how are you?"

Tony looked at him for a moment before shaking his head and turning back to Friday: "It's just never enough." he said.

"What's never enough?" asked Peter, confused.

"They never stop. First, Maximoff threw Vision at the bottom of the Compound. Then they fought us until Rhodes got hurt. Then Rogers and his boyfriend left me to die in Siberia. And now they put my- my daughter into the infirmary."

This time he said it out loud. He couldn't deny it anymore.

Yes, daughter! Daughter daughter daughter! That's what she is: my daughter! It's time to stop pretending she isn't!

And they hurt her.

"They never stop," he repeated, his eyes Extremis orange with barely contained rage.

Peter lowered his head: "I'm so sorry, Mr. Stark..."

Tony calmed down slightly at Peter's words. He smiled at him: "Thanks, kid. I'm so happy to have you on my side," he said.

He looked at Friday one more time: "I've gotta go to work," he sighed after a long pause, hesitantly turning around and leaving.

Peter watched him go, before looking inside the infirmary himself. He decided to go in.

Friday was asleep on her side, her brow lightly furrowed. Peter didn't know if it was because of the pain of her injuries or if she was dreaming.

He took a seat next to her bed: "Hey," he whispered in greeting.

For a few minutes he just looked at her. He felt like a bit of a creep, but he didn't really know what to say.
Then he took a deep breath: "You scared me, you know? You're my friend, I don't like the idea of you getting hurt..."

"Oh, believe me, I didn't like it either." Friday's voice, coming from the speakers, startled him enough to almost jump out of his chair: "Wha- Friday?" he called.

"Nope. Jocasta." she answered flatly, in typical Stark-snark fashion. "Of course it's me!"

"I thought you were sleeping!" Peter exclaimed, looking down at her.

"I am. My body is sleeping, so lower your voice or you're gonna wake me up. My program, though? That never sleeps..."

Peter was absolutely flabbergasted: "Wow. That's... Wow..."

"Creepy?" Friday asked.

"Well... a bit, yes. But in a totally badass way! You're incredible!"

"Aww, thanks. I'd be flushing if I were awake," she answered.

Peter looked at her face again, this time with an analytical stare: "Well, you kinda are..."

Friday hesitated for a long moment before answering: "No, I'm not," she said resolutely.

"Oh, you most definitely are."

"I most definitely am not."

"Are too."

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"I refuse to continue this discussion with you, Mr. Parker."

Peter laughed. Then he looked down at her again: "Alright, alright. But seriously, get well soon, Friday."

"Thank you. I will." she answered.

Peter smiled at her and got up to leave. He was almost at the door when he turned around: "By the way, how long have you been waiting to pull that sleeper-speaker trick on someone?"

"... A while," Friday answered with fake innocence.

***

Clint found Steve by the window. Their hideout was safe for now, but they would have to move out in a few hours. There was no telling when Stark would would find them. *Damned traitor.*

"Cap," he called. Steve turned to him.

"I forgot to ask you earlier, we've all been in a bit of a hurry," he smiled, before going serious: "Did Stark say anything about my family?"
"Yes, actually. He said they're safe... We didn't really stop to discuss the details, though. Sorry, Clint." Steve answered.

The archer nodded: "Do you believe him?" he asked then.

On this, Steve had no doubt: "I do." he said, fully meaning it.

Clint turned to look out of the window: "I don't."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will feature Pepper's reaction to Friday getting hurt (and a certain Head of State better get ready for that). After that, Tech Guy will be revealed...
Chapter Summary

Pepper is not pleased that Friday got hurt. Tony points her rage at a very specific target.

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter was a bit problematic to write. I'm still not 100% convinced by it, at the same time I want it out before I'm tempted to touch it again and risk messing it up... let me know what you think ;-)  

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Helen was removing the last bandage from Friday's right forearm when Pepper barged through the door like a battering ram, disheveled and on the verge of tears.

In the room were also Rhodey, Lila and Vision. No one had the time to stop her; she spotted Friday and stormed up to her, immediately enveloping her in a bone crushing hug: "Oh, my God... you're okay, right?" she asked, planting an aggressive kiss on the top of her head.

"Y-yes... I'm okay, but right now I'm having a bit of trouble breathing, Ms. Potts..." Friday answered, her voice strained by her constricted lungs.

Pepper finally released her, but kept her hands on her daughter's shoulders, staring in her beautiful brown eyes that looked exactly like Tony's: "You scared me..." she whispered, caressing Friday's cheeks, as tears started slipping down her lashes.

"I... I'm sorry, Ms. Potts... I'll be more careful next time, I promise" Friday answered.

Pepper hugged her again, this time trying to be a little gentler. Friday closed her eyes, leaning into her and hugging her back.

"...And Friday?"

"Yes?"

"Can you cut this 'Ms. Potts' nonsense, please?"

She smiled: "I will, Ms.-...mom."

***

Leaving Friday to Helen for some final checks, Pepper went to join Tony in his office.

She had told him once, back when he had found Friday building her own suit, that if their girl were ever to be injured on the battlefield, she would tear him a new one. So he was understandably on edge when he saw her entering the room without knocking.
As he stood from his desk, Pepper stormed up to him actually looking like she wanted to castrate him. Instead she hugged him tight: "I want you to make them pay in blood for what they did to her, you hear me? Give them hell, Tony. Absolute hell. If you need any help from me, I'm right here. You just have to ask. Okay?"

Tony just nodded, his expression as murderous as hers: "First I have to find them," was his answer. And he knew just where to start.

Like he'd said to Peter, he had to go to work. He opened his vault and took out Steve's burner phone. Putting the SIM and battery back in place, he turned it on and placed it on the table. "Start tracing, Friday," he ordered.

She was in the infirmary right now, with Helen and the others, but her program was everywhere and perfectly functioning regardless of her physical condition.

It was weird though. He had gotten so used at having her by his side... He so desperately wanted her by his side right now...

She answered through her speakers: "Are you sure it's worth it, Boss? Rogers is many things, but he isn't stupid. He must have gotten rid of his phone after what happened."

"I know. But if we can't find where he is, we can at least find out where he's been. It's the only lead we have right now." Tony answered, pensive.

"Fair enough. Initiating decryption and tracing, Boss."

A map of the entire world appeared in front of Tony in a 3D hologram. A red dot appeared in the center of the African continent.

"Knew it," Tony whispered, as both he and Pepper narrowed their eyes at the highlighted spot.

Wakanda.

"That's where Rogers was when he tried to contact you about Barton's family, Boss..."

Pepper bristled as Friday spoke. But then, she actually smiled: now T'Challa was well and truly screwed.

They had no footage of him in Siberia. He had managed to avoid all the surveillance cameras of the Hydra base. They could place him in Siberia by his own admission, since he was the one to apprehend Zemo there, but so far, he could easily have denied even entering the base, much less meeting Rogers and Barnes.

This, however? This nailed the bastard down. He could not hide his involvement anymore.

Her girl went on: "I'm trying to trace the GPS movements starting from there, but the encryption is very heavy. I can't promise any result."

"Yeah, I get it. Do what you can. In the meantime, Pep..." he called, leaning back in his chair with a mischievous smirk, turning to face her. Pepper gave him a smirk of her own, raising an eyebrow.

"... You wanna have some fun too?" he asked.

Her smirk became wider as her eyes narrowed dangerously.

***
Obtaining an audience with King T’Challa had been surprisingly easy... well, easy for a King’s standard.

At first there had been a few roadblocks, but as soon as Pepper had mentioned the fugitives, everyone in the king’s entourage had become incredibly polite, accommodating and easygoing. Maybe because the young king was trying to pull the wool over their eyes by appearing friendly and helpful. Or maybe he actually meant well and was trying to make amends. Pepper had never met the guy, it was only fair to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Fair, but not easy. Not for her. Not after what had happened to Friday.

They had agreed to meet at the Avengers Compound. She wondered if he was trying to show openness by agreeing to meet on Pepper's home field, or if he was just desperate to cover up his involvement.

He greeted her politely and formally, kissing her hand and bowing slightly: "Miss Potts. Such a pleasure."

Oh, in a few minutes it won't be, Pepper thought. "King T’Challa. I'm honored you accepted to meet me," she answered with the same, professional politeness.

The atmosphere seemed cordial enough, but both of them knew this was a fight. A duel. The new king of Wakanda against the woman who was considered one of, if not the, most powerful corporate shark in the world.

"If you would please follow me, we'll talk in Mr. Stark's office. I'm sure we will be more comfortable there. Your guards can wait in the common area."

T’Challa was flanked by four Dora Milaje. They all looked at Pepper with suspicion.

She held all of their gazes almost challengingly: "Is there a problem?" she asked.

All four women narrowed their eyes at her, but a placating gesture from T’Challa prevented them from even gritting their teeth.

He mentally reminded himself that captain Rogers and his team had left Wakanda without leaving any traces, so they had nothing to worry about. He was sure he could handle Miss Potts by himself.

He followed her in Tony's office. As soon as they entered, she spoke: "Friday, activate full privacy settings."

The lights dimmed slightly and the windows became obscured. All of the exits were also closed and locked. T’Challa turned to look at Pepper, his shoulders slightly tenser than before. Pepper's face now held an expression that was carved out of steel. All of the pleasantries had been left out of the door.

"What is the meaning of this?" T’Challa asked, now slightly on edge. Again he had to reassure himself: Rogers was gone. Wakanda was safe.

"I thought you would be grateful if I made it so our conversation never left this room. Sit down, your majesty." Pepper stated, making a gesture towards Tony's desk. It wasn't a request, and the king knew it.

Pepper seated herself on Tony's chair, while T’Challa took a seat on the opposite side of the desk. The irony was not lost on him: Pepper now looked like a queen on her throne, looking down at the
irrelevant, common mortal that he was. The unpleasant suspicion of having underestimated his opponent started to make T'Challa's confidence waver.

"So," Pepper started, "former captain Steve Rogers and his team have been hiding in Wakanda in the past months before secretly returning to the US. You can avoid wasting my time and yours trying to deny it."

Fear hit T'Challa like a freight train. To his credit, he didn't let it show; he narrowed his eyes and tried to look as menacing as he could, even if he knew right then and there he was anything but: "Is this a threat?"

"It's a fact," Pepper answered simply, "one that I'm sure would cause some major problems with the open borders policy you are trying to instate, if we were to make it public. How do you think the United Nations would react, knowing you harbored those who fought against the Sokovia Accords while you were arguing so passionately for them? And how do you think your own people would react, knowing the responsible for the Lagos massacre was comfortably housed in your palace?"

T'Challa could feel the cold sweat collecting on his back and forehead. Suddenly his tie was constricting his throat. How did she know? Who was this woman?

He gathered what was left of his cracking confidence and steeled himself: "Even if this was true - and it's not an admission - you said it yourself: captain Rogers is back in America now. You have no proof to support your claim." he scoffed.

Pepper gave him an angelic smile as the young king presented her with the perfect opening: *Incompetent blue-blooded snot. You're making it so easy I'm not even relishing the challenge.*

She leaned forward and went in for the kill: "While he was in Wakanda, Rogers sent an encrypted phone to Mr. Stark so he could call him when he was ready to talk, or if he needed him. No doubt a misguided, questionable attempt at an olive branch. But the part that is relevant for you, your majesty, is that Mr Stark decrypted this phone and traced it back to your country. Specifically, to your royal palace."

T'Challa's eyes bulged and his face went gray as all the blood drained from it.

She had completely cornered him.

She had him at her mercy.

He quickly decided the best defence was to attack: "...T-This is preposterous!" he yelled, standing up, "I will not tolerate this sort of-

"Sit down, T'Challa. We're just talking." she said, the perfect portrait of calmness.

The king was completely gobsmacked. He was leaning threateningly over the desk, promising repercussions of the most unpleasant kind, but this woman wasn't fazed in the least. She was sitting comfortably in Tony Stark's chair, holding his gaze unwaveringly, perfectly conscious that she was the one calling the shots in this office. Slowly, he relented and sat back down, tamed.

Pepper gave him a wry smile. She had called his bluff. Sure, Wakanda was powerful, and technologically advanced, from what she had heard. But it was a country that had little to no influence on the outside world, having always been completely isolationist. Stark Industries was a hundred- no, a thousand times more powerful. T'Challa's threats were just empty words.

She reprised with karmic calmness: "We only ask for information. All that you can tell us about
Rogers and his comrades. Everything that can lead us to their current location. You can talk to me now, and the... invitations you extended to them will never be made public. Or you can refuse, go back to your country, and get ready for Wikileaks to have a field day at your expenses. Choose wisely, your majesty."

T'Challa gulped. When he had woken up that morning, he hadn't expected this.

It was supposed to be over. Over and done with. Why was this one mistake, a mistake he had committed in good faith, coming back to torment him so?

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, "This is clearly personal. Why? I have no quarrels with you, or Mr. Stark. I haven't wronged any of you-"

"Au contraire, your Majesty," Pepper interrupted, now looking at him as if he was but a little dirt stain on her stilettos, "You did wrong Mr. Stark. On a fundamental level."

The king merely gave her a questioning look. She continued: "He was in Siberia. In that base. And so were you. Yes, you apprehended Zemo. Congratulations for that. But you also welcomed two wanted criminals in your home with open arms, while leaving behind an innocent man - the man I love. He was alone, stranded and hurt. And you left him there."

T'Challa's mouth hung open. Pepper's eyes were filled with hatred as she finished: "The love of my life was dying while you were preoccupying yourself with helping the two fugitives who had just nearly murdered him. And now, because you enabled them, another person I hold most dear has been hurt. So be careful, T'Challa, be very careful, for you have no idea what I'm capable of. Now I have questions to ask you, and you will answer them, truthfully and exhaustively. Don't test me."

***

"So, Bagheera says he's not financing them?" asked Tony in a tired voice, not looking away from the helmet of his new armor he was working on. Friday was sat next to him, looking intently at the piece of tech he was creating.

"No," answered Pepper from her seat in front of them, "he swears he's got nothing to do with any of their tech. He was also adamant that Barnes still only had one arm when they left Wakanda."

"You believe him?" he asked then.

Pepper smiled evilly: "Oh, yes. I made it very clear that if he tried to bullshit me, I would leak all the info we have. He knows we're holding him by his royal feline balls..."

Tony smiled back and nodded in acknowledgement, before looking at Friday: "anything on the burner phone?"

She shook her head: "I'm sorry, Boss. Last known location was the JFK Airport in New York, at a time compatible with Rogers' return to the States. It wasn't switched back on again after that..."

"Both our leads are busted..." Pepper mused, "I can force T'Challa to help us with his satellites..." she offered with the same evil smile as before.

Tony shook his head: "Nah. For now it's better not to pull that rope too much. Don't worry, we'll figure something out. In the meantime, Fri, I need your help with this neural link."

Pepper's brow creased: "Neural link?"
Now it was Tony who smiled mischievously: "One of the problems with Mark 47 is that I don't have a copilot: Friday's armor interface isn't working as well anymore, now that she's physical. I could upload Jocasta, but she's nowhere near as advanced as Friday, she wouldn't be much help. So, starting with Mark 48, I'm connecting my armor directly to my synapses: I think it, the armor does it."

Pepper's jaw dropped slightly, amazed at Tony's solution, before the evil smirk returned to her face: "Watch out, Team Cap, Mark 48 is coming for you..." she sneered.

"Indeed," cackled Tony, "I have the perfect codename for this armor."

"What is it?" Pepper wanted to know.

Tony looked at her, then at Friday: "Sweet Revenge."

When the two girls looked at him questioningly, he confirmed their suspects: "No one hurts my daughter and gets away unscathed..." he said, before leaning slightly closer to Friday and raising her chin with his thumb and index finger: "...no one." he concluded.

Friday was genuinely touched. Pepper was fully approving. Tony was smirking like a perfect Bond villain.

***

Two months into her house arrest sentence, and Natasha was starting to feel like the walls of the Compound were closing in around her.

The inactivity was starting to be too much to bear. She felt like a caged animal.

She was trying to distract herself by spending more and more time with Clint's family, and Laura was probably starting to get sick of her. Bless that woman for her patience.

Most of all, Natasha was afraid of getting rusty. Two years were a long time without using her skills on the field, and she hadn't become Black Widow by sitting on her hands and doing nothing.

It was with these worries in mind that Tony found her in her room.

He opened the door to a slit without knocking, waiting for a throwing knife or something of the like to fly towards him through the narrow opening. When nothing happened, he opened the door a bit more and peeked his head inside: "Hey," he greeted simply, smiling, spotting Natasha in the corner next to the door, with a gun raised towards him.

"Hey," she answered, not smiling back but lowering the gun, "you should know better than to get in my room without knocking."

If Tony was impressed or scared by her peculiar welcoming, he didn't show it. He only raised an eyebrow: "Do I want to know how and where you got that gun?"

Natasha avoided the question and retorted with one of her own: "What do you want, Stark?"

Tony became serious: "That nuclear facility was the last straw. The Committee has had it with Steve's fuck-ups. I managed to buy us some time, but not much. We need to find Rogers, and we need to do it yesterday. We could use your help."

"I thought I was on house arrest..." she scoffed, clicking the safety release on the gun back in place.
Tony nodded, and a subtle smirk etched his features: "Indeed. Which makes me think it will be best to use you only as a consultant, for the time being."

At that jab Natasha reeled back, scoffing incredulously: "Did you pull a grudge? What, Black Widow yes, Natasha Romanoff not recommended?"

Tony conceded to her point, smiling: "Look, I'm just trying to keep you from getting cabin fever. Laura and the kids are worried, and quite frankly, so am I."

That gave Natasha pause.

Tony was worried for her?

After everything that happened, after she stabbed him in the back and caused his best friend to be paralyzed, he was still worried about her?

She didn't deserve it in the slightest. If anything, it made her feel even more disgusted with herself.

"Romanoff, you still with me?"

Tony's voice brought her back to reality: "I- yeah. Yeah, I'm here," she stuttered.

"Well? You coming or what?" asked Tony, opening the door a bit more and leaning on the wall.

She smiled a sincere smile, lowering her gaze. After a moment she placed the gun down on the nightstand, before exiting her room: "Lead the way," she said simply.

Tony smiled back at her.

***

"Alright, class," Tony started, "Here's the situation: Rogers and his minions are back on US soil. We know they've been hiding in Wakanda for a while, but we have good reason to believe their new tech, most notably Barnes' new arm, doesn't come from there."

"So you're saying Rogers has a new sugar daddy..." Sharon interjected.

Her words made Tony feel both slightly vindicated and very disappointed. Vindicated, because the way Sharon had just spat Rogers' name showed she really had switched sides and was firmly with him now. Disappointed, because that was exactly what he had been for them: a sugar daddy. Nothing more.

Sharon was living there at the Compound now, but at least she was paying him rent. Rhodey was staying there only until he regained full mobility of his legs, then he would go back to his place. Natasha was on house arrest, and her access was heavily restricted to only a few of the common rooms. Vision and Friday were family. Even Laura was in talks with Pepper and Happy for a job to pay him back for his hospitality.

But Rogers and his crew? They had just made themselves at home. Not only that: they had continuously demanded money and tech, and even protested harshly if he was ever slow to deliver. Of course, God forbid they ever uttered a 'thank you'.

Sharon had caught his point, alright: "Yes," he said, "Someone is providing Rogers' team with new equipment, and that could be a good starting point: we find the tech guy, we find them. Any ideas?"

"Well, Hammer Tech could be a good candidate. You did throw their CEO in jail, after all..."
Natasha imputed, smiling.

"Yeah, possibly..." Tony mused.

"What about Pym Technologies?" Rhodey asked seriously.

"Excuse you!?" yelled Hope.

"Hey, I'm just considering the facts here," Rhodey defended, "you guys have a weapons division, you built Lang's suit, and your father hates Tony's guts by association. Is it really so far fetched?"

"Are you stupid or just petty?" Hope snarled, "do you really think I would be here and that I would have attacked Scott in Pennsylvania if I was playing double agent!?"

"You're the one who's stupid: I didn't say 'Hope Van Dyne'. I said 'Pym Technologies'. Perhaps the old man's still feeling pissy about his precious particles?"

Before Hope could launch herself at Rhodey's throat, Friday diffused the situation: "To be fair, Miss Van Dyne, it could be a third person who's somehow eluding both you and Mr. Pym..."

"Yes, perhaps one of the technicians who were working with Darren Cross and whom you fired after the Yellowjacket's demise," added Vision.

Hope was disgusted: "Why are you suddenly all so sure it's someone inside my company!? It could just as well be someone in Stark Industries!" she shouted.

That wasn't true. After Stane, Tony had eyes and ears everywhere inside Stark Industries. He wasn't going to be fooled again: Phineas Mason had tried, and he had been fired so fast he had turned evil. If someone in SI was stupid enough to try and help Steve behind their backs, Pepper, Friday or Tony would have known immediately.

But Hope didn't need to know that: "You're right," he said, raising a placating hand towards Hope, "it could be one of mine just as well as one of yours. Actually, let's start from that, oaky?"

Hope seemed to calm down a bit. Tony turned to the others: "You, you and you" he said, pointing to Friday, Natasha and Sharon, "make a list of every company you think could be capable of outfitting Barnes with that thing. Then check every single employee, from the CEO to the friggin' valet, no exceptions. Bank accounts, phone calls, everything. Starting with SI, then Pym Tech."

Sharon's eyes bulged: "Um... That's gonna take a while, you know that, right?"

"Then you'd better get started," Tony retorted, smiling condescendingly. Sharon gave him a desperate look, but Rhodey caught his attention again: "Yeah, I would actually start with Pym Tech," he muttered.

When Hope gave him another withering look, he raised his hands in surrender: "Hey, it's just the alphabetical order. The P comes before the S..."

Hope scoffed and shook her head: "You know what? I'm leaving. I can't deal with you any longer today, Rhodes. And I need to be back in San Francisco tomorrow evening anyway," she said curtly, standing up and leaving the room.

The meeting was adjourned, but Tony stayed in the room a few moments more, with a pensive expression.
When he finally got up from his chair, he caught up with Friday, Natasha and Sharon and grabbed the latter two by the elbows: "Guys, Rhodey might have a point. Start the search from Pym Tech. I'm taking off for San Francisco tonight."

"You think she's involved?" Natasha asked, also looking at him.

"I'm not sure. But you see, Romanoff," Tony explained, putting an arm around her shoulders, "if I have learned one thing from the various life-changing events that have transpired in my wake, it's that it's better to be safe than sorry."

"So you're spying on your new teammate?" she asked.

"Yup. Don't worry, it's nothing sexual, I promise." Tony quipped.

"You're not even waiting for us to come up with any proof whatsoever?" Sharon added.

"What did I just tell you? Better safe than sorry. And in the off chance, the sooner you clear Pym Tech from suspect, she sooner I break contact, send Van Dyne a fruit basket with my apologies and come home. So chop chop, you got work to do." Tony smiled, patting Natasha's shoulder twice before releasing her. With that, he left them and went in the direction of the living quarters.

Sharon nodded to herself, accepting Tony's idea. On the other hand, Natasha still wasn't so sure about it.

The spy drew a long breath and shook her head: "I don't like it. What if he's wrong about this?" she breathed.

Friday looked in the direction Tony had taken for a couple more seconds before turning to her:

"...and what if he's right?"

Chapter End Notes

... Is it really Hope? Is it Hank? Is it both? Is it neither???

One thing is for sure: Tech Guy's identity will be revealed next chapter.
The Tech Guy

Chapter Summary

Hope is headed for San Francisco...

Chapter Notes

So, you've been waiting for him and here he is: Tech Guy is finally revealed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Pym Technologies jet carrying Hope back to the West Coast wasn't a fancy aircraft like the Avengers Quinjets, or really any other of Stark's private jets. But it gave Hope enough time to think.

Rhodes had planted this bug in her head, and it just wouldn't go away. Because she knew something they didn't.

The particles powering hers and Scott's suits weren't infinite. By her estimates, he should have more or less run out of particles all the way back in Leipzig. But in Pennsylvania, he had been able to hold Giant Man for almost ten minutes.

She didn't like it, but it was plausible that someone had refueled Scott. And there was only one person, beside her, who had access to the particles.

She had to be sure.

She took out her phone and dialed her father's number. He picked up at the first ring:

"Hope, hi. How are you?"

"I'm okay, dad, thanks," she answered smiling, "I'm calling you for Avengers business."

"Oh, goodness. Is Stark creating another murder-bot?"

Well, Rhodes wasn't wrong about her father hating Stark by association. "No, no. It's just, I was thinking about the Ant Man suit..."

"What about it?"

**Moment of truth**, Hope thought. "Well...we saw Scott using Giant Man in Leipzig, and we know how many particles that drains... but then he managed to use it again in Pennsylvania. Shouldn't he have run out of juice by then?" she asked, scared of the answer.

"Ah, see," her father started, "I found out Scott took a pretty big supply of particles when he left for Leipzig. I guess he wanted to be ready for every possibility."

Hope let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. *Thank God.*
But... "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Her father hesitated before answering: "I'm sorry. I just found out. I wanted to make sure exactly how many particles he took before telling you..."

Fair enough. It made sense. "It's ok, Dad..."

"How is working with the Avengers?" Hank asked, changing the subject.

Hope drew a long breath: "I know you didn't exactly approve when I decided to join them, but it's really not that bad. Stark isn't such an asshole, after all. He's actually a really nice guy after you get to know him. His friend Rhodes, on the other hand... We think someone is financing and equipping Rogers' crew. Rhodes started suspecting PymTech."

Hank scoffed: "Figures. See? That's exactly why I didn't want you involved with the Avengers: Stark's bastardness is contagious. Maybe it's someone inside Stark Industries that's helping Rogers. It could even be Stark himself. I wouldn't put it past Howard's son to conspire with international terrorists and then have his buddy accuse others to divert suspects. Be careful around him, Hope. I don't trust him one bit."

"I will, dad. Don't worry."

"Good. That's my girl."

"Well, I have work to do now. See you, dad."


Hope's relief lasted about twenty seconds after the call had been disconnected before a new doubt started festering her mind.

Scott was good at two things: math and stealing. He had a Master in electrical engineering and he really liked breaking into houses. Other than that, he was a total nincompoop.

Was it really possible that such an idiot had planned as far ahead as bringing extra particles with him just in case he became an international fugitive and needed the suit again?

The answer was almost certainly no.

***

For the whole drive from the airport to her destination, Hope felt like she was doing this completely wrong. It was wrong to drag more people into this hot mess. But there weren't many others she could trust. And she really, really wanted to prove Rhodes wrong by herself before calling Stark.

She stepped out of her car and walked up to the porch of the house. She took a deep breath before ringing the doorbell.

Jim Paxton opened the door in seconds: "Hope!" he called, offering his hand with a smile. She shook it and smiled back: "Hi, Jim."

"Hopey!" came another, much younger voice from inside the house, before Cassie Lang appeared behind her stepfather and enveloped Hope's waist in a hug.

"Hi, honey. I missed you," Hope greeted, crouching down to Cassie's eye level.
"Is it true that you're an Avenger now?" Cassie asked, full of enthusiasm.

"Yup. Official member," Hope smiled.

"Have you ever seen Lady Iron without her suit? What is she like? Is she pretty?" Cassie pressed.

Paxton decided to rein his stepdaughter in before Hope had to answer: "Come on, sweetheart, let Hope breathe. She must be tired." he said, taking Cassie's hand and turning her towards the living room: "Come in, Hope. What brings you here? I thought you were in New York doing Avengers stuff..."

"I was, actually. It's kind of why I'm here," she said.

***

"So you're saying your father is helping Scott?" asked Jim. He and Hope were sitting in the patio, drinking a Long Island.

"That's what I need to find out," was her answer.

"Have you talked to him?"

"Yes. He said Scott took a big cache of particles before going to Germany."

"Do you believe him?"

That's the killer question. "I... Yes. Yeah, I believe him."

Jim took a sip of his tea, staring in the distance for a long moment, before speaking: "Hope, if you believe him, why are we here?"

Hope closed her eyes as if to center herself before answering: "Because I could be wrong, so I need a favour."

***

Jim parked his Crown Vic at the beginning of the dirt track heading into the park. It was almost midnight, so no one should be inside. Which meant Hank shouldn't be here.

For two days he had shadowed the old man, feeling like a bit of a bastard. After all, Hank had paid for all the reparations his house had needed after that nutjob Cross had attacked his family, plus a hefty bonus, and now he was protecting him, Maggie and Cassie from the fallout of the Avengers Civil War.

At first, no one had bothered them, but as soon as Scott's identity became known, the trouble had started: some bullies at school had picked on Cassie, someone had thrown eggs at their house, and his colleagues at the Department looked at him like he was a criminal, or a fool, or both.

But Hank had helped. They had to transfer Cassie to a new school, but he had paid for everything, and he had agreed to be interrogated by the police - namely, by him - giving them as many informations he could about Ant Man.

So Paxton had had to fight with his conscience to accept Hope's request. For the last two days he had followed Hank, not finding anything suspicious in his behavior and kind of hoping it would stay that way.
But apparently, it was not to be.

Because Hank had just picked the lock of a fence of the public park and had driven inside. At midnight.

Paxton closed the door of his car and went in on foot. The place was full of trees, and almost completely dark. He avoided getting lost only by staying onto the track.

He hid behind a tree and drew his gun when he spotted Hank's old convertible in a wide opening, surrounded by trees and illuminated by several lamp posts. Hank was leaning against the door of the car, clearly waiting for someone. At his feet was a medium sized suitcase.

With a heavy heart, Paxton drew his phone and texted his location to Hope. Just as he did that, a jet appeared in the air and landed vertically - and very silently, Jim noticed - next to Hank's car.

It looked a bit like the jet the Avengers used to travel around the world. But this one was clearly an older model: all boxy and squared, nothing like the sleek and elegant aircraft that Tony Stark had created for the Avengers.

The cargo ramp on the back of the plane opened, and three people stepped out. Their faces had been all over the news for months: Jim recognized them immediately as Falcon, Hawkeye and Scarlet Witch. All of them were in their battle uniforms, as if ready for a fight. Jim supposed when you're an international criminal you can never be too careful.

Hank approached them: "Where are the others?" he asked.

It was Falcon who answered him: "Cap's been hurt in Pennsylvania. Barnes and Scott stayed home with him."

Jim noticed they seemed to know each other pretty well. Hawkeye walked up to Hank: "No offence, but if we could hurry this up..."

"Right," Hank agreed. He took the suitcase and handed it to him: "It's all here. Tell Scott to go easy out there. The Avengers are starting to suspect me, I won't be able to help you at a moment's notice for a while."

Jim's phone vibrated. It was a text from Hope: it only said 'I'm here'.

Just in time, he thought, coming out of his hiding spot and pointing his gun at the group: "Freeze!"

Aside from Hank, they didn't look particularly impressed: "Who the hell's this loser?" asked Barton.

"Paxton!? What are you doing here!?" shrieked Hank, outraged.

"Funny, I was about to ask you the exact same thing! Helping criminals while your own daughter plays for the opposing team? What the hell is wrong with you!?" Jim retorted through gritted teeth.

"I'm helping the Avengers! The real Avengers, not Stark's lackeys!" Hank justified.

"Oh, please, you sound like a broken record! Is that how you're gonna explain this to Hope? Stark is bad so the other guys are automatically good?"

"That's actually how it is," Scarlet Witch interjected, "and I'm sorry, but you're not going to stop us with a handgun, whoever you are," she said, fully convinced that this regular man with his cute
sidearm was just on a fool's errand against three Avengers.

But Paxton merely smirked: "Oh, I'm not stopping you. She is." he said, pointing with his eyes to a spot behind them.

Hope stepped forward emerging from the darkness. Like them, she was suited up and ready for battle.

Her eyes were trained on Hank and her expression was furious: "You know, I almost wish I didn't see it. You lied to me again," she spat venomously.

Hank blanched: "Hope-

"Shut up! Don't you even dare to try and come up with an excuse! You're gonna pay for this!" she hissed.

Right then, Hawkeye decided they had talked enough. He ripped the suitcase from Hank's hand and ran towards the old Quinjet: "Let's go!" he shouted. Jim opened fire on him, but Wanda created a barrier with her powers between them and the policeman.

Hope leapt forward, shrinking down and trying to get around the witch's barrier. The other two fugitives noticed this and Falcon's wings unfolded before swatting her to the ground. She unshrunked and got back on her feet.

Wanda had pushed Jim backwards with her powers before turning on Hope, throwing a hex of red energy at her. Hope barely dodged, and the ominous scarlet ball of mist crashed onto a tree, making it fall immediately.

In retrospect, it hadn't been such a great idea. Going out alone against half of Rogers' team hadn't been part of the plan.

*God, I should never have dragged Jim in this...*

Now they were both in danger: these guys didn't seem to be pulling any punches back in Pennsylvania, and they sure as hell weren't going to start now.

She was about to get up and counterattack when the unexpected happened.

A streak of light appeared in the sky, veering towards them. As it grew closer, Hope barely had the time to recognize the shape of Iron Man before he landed in his usual crouch right between Falcon and Scarlet Witch.

"Gentlemen..." Stark said, raising to his full height and pointing his hands against his two ex-teammates while the repulsors charged with the usual whine, "...drop your weapons."

Everybody froze at his arrival. For a moment, it almost seemed that Iron Man was towering over them all like a judge in front of some accused.

Hope noticed we was using a new armor: it was painted almost entirely in a deep, dark electric blue, with a silver faceplate and silver stripes on its chest plate and shoulders.

He turned to her: "Yes, I followed you, yes, I saw the whole exchange, and no, I will not apologize," he said. Hope noticed the strained tone of his voice. She suspected he was trying very hard not to kick Barton, Wilson and Maximoff's collective asses. *They are exactly the three that hurt Friday back at the nuclear facility...*
"Stark..." Hank seethed with pure hatred coating his voice, catching Hope's attention.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" came Tony's answer.

"Hank Pym. Displeased to finally meet you."

"Displeased to meet you too."

Jim's pained yell stopped their not-so-playful banter: Clint was behind him, holding him by the neck of his shirt and pointing a gun at his head: "Alright, now that we've got the introductions out of the way," said Hawkeye in a warning tone, "if you don't mind, we're leaving. And Professor Pym comes with us."

He was bluffing, and Tony knew it - "You're not gonna do it, Barton," he scoffed.

"No," Clint admitted, "but neither are you, Stark. You might hit Wyatt Earp, here..."

Tony weighed his options. Normally he could have neutralized Barton with his eyes closed. Mark 48, 'Sweet Revenge', had a neural link that connected it to his synapses and made this armor truly act like a part of his own body, and its targeting systems were more precisely calibrated than any of his previous suits.

But it was still untested: this was literally the first time he had donned this armor. And with Wanda there, ready to shield Clint with her powers, there was no telling if he could avoid his shot from striking the wrong man.

Hope made up his mind for him: "Stark, don't..." she said, raising a hand to stop him. Tony relented, lowering his hands.

Wanda smiled at him: "Well, too bad we have to leave so early. Another time, Stark." she jeered.

"Sooner than you think, Sabrina," Tony retorted.

Wanda scoffed before boarding the jet. Wilson and Pym followed suit. Barton didn't.

"Where's my family, Stark?" he demanded.

"Since when do you care about your family, Barton?" was Tony's answer.

"Don't mess with me, Tony..." Clint warned.

"Could you guys please discuss this when he's not pointing a gun at my head?" Paxton interjected in a distressed tone.

Tony decided not to push it. Clint could do something he would regret: "They're at the Compound. None of them was hurt."

"I don't believe you," Clint seethed.

"Well, you can always come with me and take a look for yourself," Tony spat derisively.

"Sorry, I'm kinda on the clock. But I'm warning you," he said walking backwards towards the jet and getting in, pulling Paxton with him, "If I find out they're hurt, you'll never see me coming."

With that warning, he pushed a button on the side bulkhead of the jet and the ramp started closing.
"We're just gonna let them go?" Hope asked, furious.

"Like hell we are," seethed Tony just as the jet started to take off. He started his repulsors and hovered a few feet from the ground.

"Stark, wait! That plane's too fast for me!"

Tony turned to her and opened one of the missile launchers on his shoulders: "Hop in. Try not to touch anything," he said, gesturing with his thumb to the launcher.

***

"You sit here and be quiet," Clint warned as he pushed Jim down on one of the seats in the back of the Quinjet and cuffed him to the frame.

He had stolen the craft from an abandoned SHIELD deposit, it was the best he could find once they were back in the States. But it was nowhere near as good as the jets the Avengers used these days.

Clint knew Tony could blow them out of the sky with little to no effort if he wanted to, hence why he had to take a hostage: "Don't worry, we'll drop you off as soon as we're sure Stark isn't following us."

"You're gonna land the plane before you drop me off, right?" Paxton retaliated. From his seat on the opposite bulkhead, Hank gave him a crossed look.

"Depends if you can shut up for five minutes or not," Clint hissed, stalking to the cockpit and starting the engines. The jet raised vertically for about fifty feet, then Clint switched from the propellers inside the wings to the jet engines in the back of the aircraft, and they were off.

***

Shrunken down and nuzzled between two missile canisters, Hope was doing her best to hold on to something and at the same time not accidentally set off one of the weapons.

Tony's voice echoed in the closed space: "Alright, Van Dyne, I'm scanning the jet: Barton's flying and Maximoff is riding shotgun. The others are in the cargo bay. I'm going to get us in from the front, and as soon as I open up, I need you to stun Witchy enough to drop her. Got it?"

She charged her stingers, ready for action: "Got it."

"Get ready, here we go."

***

After two minutes of smooth flight, Clint drew a breath: "I think we lost 'em."

Exactly as he said that, Iron Man's punch smashed through the side window, hitting him in the side of his head, shattering his cheekbone and knocking him out. The jet rocked and jolted before spinning in an uncontrolled barrel roll. Air started gushing inside like a tornado, and both Hank and Jim screamed, holding on to their seats.

From her seat next to Clint, Wanda tried to attack Tony, but before she could, the missile launcher on Iron Man's shoulder opened and Wasp flew up to her, stingers charged to almost full power. She strucked Wanda right over the heart, making her lose consciousness too.

In the back, holding onto a strap attached to the bulkhead to avoid being thrown off by the
uncontrolled spin of the aircraft and the whirlwind caused by the air gushing inside through the smashed window, Falcon realized in a split second that this battle was lost. But that didn't mean he was just gonna sit there and watch it happen.

He snatched the suitcase full of Pym Particles, then grabbed Hank by the waist: "Hold on!" he shouted, sprinting to the back of the jet. In a moment, the ramp was opened and the Falcon flew out in the night, Hank Pym holding onto him.

Hope grew back to her normal size and considered flying after him, but she doubted she would catch him, especially in the pitch black night. And anyway, they had more pressing matters to deal with.

Tony had crawled inside and moved Clint off the seat. He was already stabilizing the plane, while Hope reached the cargo hold and closed the ramp. She then proceeded to free Jim of his restraints. The man was hunched over and breathing heavily from the scare.

"I'm sorry. I should never have dragged you into this..." Hope apologized when he had calmed slightly. He just nodded in acknowledgement.

***

Tony finally landed the jet and moved to the back, stepping out of his armor: "Alright, two for three, not bad," he noticed, "though I would have appreciated it if you had come clean to begin with..." he said to Hope.

She winced: "Stark, look... I'm sorry. I know you don't want people to keep secrets from you. I understand that. But I really didn't know anything about this, and I just... wanted to make sure. Then I saw my father handing over the particles, and I had to intervene... I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

Tony was about to respond when Clint, who had regained consciousness, tried to get the jump on Tony and attack him from behind. But Paxton had already noticed him squirming before he jumped up, and was ready to intervene: he drew a taser from his ankle holster and striked him before he could get close. Clint's body seized and trembled before falling backwards between the seats of the cockpit.

"You little bastard," Paxton hissed at Clint's still seizing form while lowering his taser.

Tony was impressed. He looked at Clint, then at Paxton, and held his hand out: "Tony, by the way..."

Paxton shook it awkwardly: "Uh, Jim. Sargeant Jim Paxton. But... yeah, call me Jim."

"Well, thanks for the saving, Jim," Tony smiled.

"Oh, welcome. I guess we're even, considering..."

"Yeah, fair enough," Tony agreed. Then he turned to Hope. He was not pleased that she went behind his back, but he could understand why she did it: "Are you alright?" he asked.

Hope looked down: "...no," she admitted.

Tony sighed, looking down for a minute before addressing her again: "We don't have to do it now, but at some point, you and I are gonna need to have a longer conversation about all this..."

She nodded, not looking him in the eye: "Yeah, I know. I screwed up. I'm sorry..."
He put an arm around her shoulders: "Alright. Apology accepted. We'll sort this out, okay? For now, let's just pack up Bonnie and Clyde here and go home," he encouraged, looking at Clint and Wanda's slumped forms.

Chapter End Notes

Tony's new armor, Mark 48 'Sweet Revenge', has the same color scheme as Steve's STRIKE stealth uniform from CA: TWS. You know, just to remind him he's worked for friggin' Hydra. And to mock him, of course.
Clint's awakening wasn't pleasant.

The entire left side of his head was pulsating and screaming in pain, and his neck felt sore for having been unconscious in a sitting position with his head lolled to one side.

*Oh, right, Stark punched me in the face with the armor...* *Fuck, it hurts like a bitch...*

The first thing he noticed was that he was in an interrogation room: he was sitting at a table with a big mirror on the opposite side and a camera on the corner of the ceiling. His hands were cuffed behind him, but otherwise he was free to move as he wanted. Looking at his reflection on the mirror, he saw the left side of his face was almost completely purple and swollen. He definitely had a broken cheekbone.

Well, he should probably count himself lucky his skull hadn't outright exploded when Stark had hit him. That bastard. Turning on him, on Steve and all of the others like that... they were supposed to be his teammates, for fuck's sake!

The second thing he noticed were the two other people in the room with him: Rhodes, who was sitting at the table, opposite from him, and Stark himself, who was pacing slowly behind Rhodes, talking to the phone.

"-ilson escaped with Pym, we only got Barton and Maximoff. Yes, Sir, as soon as you're done, please. Alright. Thank you." was all Clint could get from the conversation before Stark hung up.

"Look, Sleeping Beauty has awakened," Rhodes snorted, referring to Clint.

"Oh, good. Perfect timing." Stark exclaimed, sitting down next to Rhodes.

Clint seethed. He wasn't at one hundred per cent, but he could wiggle out of those cuffs and take down Stark in seconds, 'specially since there didn't seem to be any Iron Man armor in the room. Fools, they thought it was safe for them to just put a pair of cuffs on him. Rhodes was a trained military officer, but Clint knew he was paralyzed from the waist down. He could easily subdue him too.
He was about to do just that when Rhodes spoke again: "What did Ross say?"

"He's talking to the UN panel. They're discussing what to do with Katniss and Morgana. He'll call us back as soon as they've reached a decision." Tony answered.

That sent Clint reeling: "Ross!? Didn't you kill him? It was in the news!" he shrieked.

"I did. This is Everett Ross, JCTC task force," Tony explained.

Right, the Joint Counter Terrorism Center task force. They were hunting down him and the others as if they were terrorists.

It made Clint furious: "Where did you take us? Where's Wanda?" he demanded.

"Come on, Barton. Don't you recognize a place you broke into six months ago?" scoffed Rhodes.

Clint creased his brow: "the Avengers Compound?"

"Do you want a prize?" Rhodes smirked.

"Why am I here?"

"You'll be transferred to your new and probably last domicile as soon as the Accords panel has decided where to stash you," explained Tony, "But I thought I would give you the chance to cooperate. Give us Rogers' location and you might come out of jail before you start needing old man diapers."

Clint didn't even consider the offer. He had something else in mind: "Didn't you say you transferred my family here?" he asked.

"I did," confirmed Tony.

"Where are they? I want to see them. Now."

"You're not in the position to make requests, much less give orders. And anyway, they don't want to see you." Tony stated calmly.

Clint exploded out of his seat, making the chair fall backwards: "Yeah, sure! The only reason you're not letting me see them is because they're not here! You fucking liar! You have them somewhere else, don't you!? Probably imprisoned like you had Wanda, or worse! How do you even sleep at night, Stark? Imprisoning and hurting women and children!? You absolute fu-"

Clint's tirade was cut short by the sound of the door slamming open.

Laura was there.

She was unhurt, completely free of any restraint, and nearly apoplectic with rage. She stalked up to him and punched him as hard as she could, right on his already broken cheekbone.

Clint tripped on his toppled chair and fell flat on his rear, completely stunned. Only then, looking up at her, he noticed she was wearing brass knuckles on her right fist. What!?

"Laura-" he called, absolutely shocked.

But she wasn't done with him. She kicked him in the ribs, sending him sprawled next to the table.
"You stupid..." she growled, grabbing the table and moving it out of the way before kicking him again, "...worthless..." she continued with another kick, this time in the stomach, "...idiotic..." another kick, again on the ribs, "...son of a bitch!" she yelled with a last kick, straight to his nose.

"Holy crap..." laughed Rhodey in surprise, enjoying the impromptu show from his seat. Tony was slightly more active: he came up behind Laura, gently grabbing her by the elbows and dragging her back: "Laura, calm down..." he soothed.

Clint looked up at his incensed wife: "W-What the hell!?!" he stuttered.

Laura was breathing heavily as she ripped herself free of Tony's grasp. She walked up to him again and grabbed him by his shirt: "Get up," she snarled, hoisting him up with a strength that showed just how pissed she was, and shoving him against the wall: "Do you have the faintest idea of what you're talking about, you piece of shit!?" she asked him, still reeling with rage.

Clint was absolutely gobsmacked: "Laura, wha-"

"Tony and Friday are the only reason the kids and I are even alive!" she yelled.

He didn't understand a single word: "F-Friday? Who's Friday?" he queried innocently.

That, if possible, seemed to piss Laura off even more: "Oh, right. You don't know her. You don't know shit of what happened lately. Well, allow me to bring you up to speed on Friday: you probably know her as Lady Iron. She's Tony's daughter, she's the one who saved us from General Ross, and she's become your daughter's new hero. And, icing on the cake, she's the one you almost killed in Pennsylvania when you and your criminal friends stormed a nuclear facility!"

Clint didn't even try to defend himself from his wife's accusations. His brain was receiving too many informations at once. But one of them, among all the others, was an absolute bombshell.

He turned to Tony: "You... you have a daughter?" he asked.

"Oh yeah he does," Laura answered in Tony's stead, making Clint turn back to her, "and he would do anything for her. You know why!? Because he loves her! And he would never leave her to become an international fugitive!"

Clint finally caught his bearings: "Laura, it wasn't like that. Stark, he had imprisoned Wanda."

That earned him a backhand, again on the left side of his face. Thankfully there were no brass knuckles on her left hand, but Laura still used enough force that the wedding ring on her finger split his lower lip: "Because that's what all this is about, isn't it!?" Laura erupted, "Wanda Fucking Maximoff, a poor little flower abused by the cruel, harsh life! I should have expected it really, it's such a cliché: a retired man with middle age crisis running away with a young foreign bimbo! Has she spread her legs yet?" she raged.

"What? What the fuck are you talking about!?" Clint asked, offended.

"Oh, did I get it wrong!?" Laura responded, "Because you see, she's a twenty-six year old eye candy, and you absolute scumbag left your home as soon as you heard her name! Forgive me for thinking you two have been at it behind my back!"

"I would never! She's- she's like a daughter to me!" Clint defended.

It was the wrong thing to say.
Laura brought the brass knuckles to bear once again. This time she flat out punched him in the nose, sending him back on the floor: "You already had a daughter, you worthless asshole! And she needed you far more than that fucking witch! Tony-" she pointed behind her at the man, "-and everyone else here at the Compound are doing all they can to make her life bearable now, but you fucking broke her heart! Do you want to know how she reacted when she learned you were gonna be taken here? She started crying, asking me if we could leave for the time you were at the Compound! Coop? He asked me when you were going to be taken away, so he could finally come out of his room without the risk of running into you! And Nate doesn't even know who you are! That's what your children think about you! You might not know this, but being almost kidnapped by a corrupted Army General because of your father tends to damage your opinion of him!"

Clint was shocked, but he wasn't gonna take this: "You wouldn't have been endangered if Stark hadn't gone in bed with Ross! Why the fuck are you believing his word over mine!?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe 'cause he freaking saved me and my children from Ross while you were off tanning your butt in Wakanda!? Yes, we know you were in Wakanda. Did you enjoy fucking your beloved Maximoff in the African sun!?"

"I'm not... having sex with Wanda!" Clint shrieked, embarrassed. By this point, Laura had brought him on the verge of tears.

"Well, your loss, because you sure as hell aren't having sex with me anymore." Laura scoffed.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Clint asked, now truly scared.

"It means," Laura seethed, removing her wedding ring and throwing it at him, "I want a divorce. You can shove that ring up your ass, or on Maximoff's finger for all I care. I'll do everything in my power so you're never getting close to me or my children again. And you better get ready: Tony will provide me with an entire death squad of ruthless lawyers with the body of a human and the head of a shark that will skin you alive! Right, Tony?" she asked, turning to him.

Tony was still slightly dazed by Laura's massive rage outburst. But to his credit, he answered as quickly as he could: "Uh, sure, anything you want. Should be easy for them to skin him, he's a condemned terrorist, after all..."

"Right. He's not just a pig. He's a criminal." Laura spat, sashaying away from Clint and towards Tony: "Thank you, Tones. What would I do without you?" she said in a sultry voice, pressing her whole body against Tony's side, caressing his left cheek with a hand and placing a featherlight kiss on the other, very close to his mouth.

Clint's eyes were bulging out of their sockets as the scene unfolding before him reduced him once again to a stuttering mess: "Wha..."

Laura's lips lingered close to Tony's face a lot longer than acceptable. Finally removing herself from Tony, she turned to Clint, an evil smirk adorning her features: "Pathetic excuse of a man..." she sneered, leaving the room.

After several seconds of awkward silence, Tony spoke: "Okay... Unexpected, but not altogether unpleasant," he smiled.

"You bastard!" Clint bellowed, expertly slipping his right hand out of the cuffs and throwing himself at Tony.

That was when he was met with another nasty surprise: he swung his right punch at Tony as hard as
he could... and Tony caught it.

One handed, with absolutely no effort.

Clint's surprise was overshadowed by pain when Tony squeezed his wrist. There was smoke raising from where Tony's hand was around his arm!

He was already howling in pain as Tony swung his other punch, and unlike Laura's hits, this was strong enough to shatter his septum.

For the umpteenth time, Clint was down on the floor, blood running copiously from his destroyed nose and two of his front teeth missing. How!? He's just a civilian! What the fuck is going on!? This is a bad dream, isn't it!? Tony was towering over him, and his eyes were now glowing an ominous orange.

Clint was absolutely paralyzed by fear as Tony spoke: "You know, what Laura said was true: you hurt my daughter, you little shit stain. I was trying very hard to be reasonable and not disembowel you with my bare hands, but since you absolutely have to test my patience..." he growled, grabbing him by his hair and pulling him up against the wall, his face absolutely murderous.

Clint was completely petrified, uttering unintelligible, scared sounds as his gaze wildly shifted from Tony's glowing eyes, to Rhody, who was now standing next to him with a pair of crutches - How is he standing up!? How is Stark this strong!? What the hell is happening!? - to the burn on his arm.

Tony decided he'd scared him enough. He broke into a small, good-hearted laugh as his eyes turned back to their usual brown, letting go of Clint's hair and patting him twice on his unhurt cheek, before turning around to leave.

As soon as he was released, Clint slid down the wall until he was once again with his butt on the floor: "What the hell did you do!?" he shakily managed to ask.

"I survived." Tony answered cryptically as he and Rhody exited the room.

Outside, Laura was waiting for them near the door, Happy Hogan at her side.

"Romanoff taught you well, Former Mrs. Barton," Tony said.

She was slightly red in the face: "I'm sorry, Tony. I just... I really wanted him to feel how hurt I am," she admitted.

"Don't worry," Tony waved her off, "just... a little warning next time?" he said as they all started down the corridor.

"You're lucky Pepper didn't see you pull that trick, L," Rhody smiled.

"Yeah, let's all agree to never mention this around her. I have three kids, I don't wanna die," she answered.

They all laughed before Happy changed the topic: "Those knuckles fit you?" He asked.

"Well, they're a bit loose, I think I need slightly smaller ones..." Laura answered, raising her right hand and examining the brass knuckles on her fingers.

"I'm sure Tony can custom build them, if you ask nicely," Happy smiled, slapping Tony on the shoulder.
Tony smiled back: "Oh, you don't even have to ask. Consider it done."

"And about that job we were talking about, the one in SI security... am I hired?" Laura asked then.

"Hell yeah!" Tony and Happy answered enthusiastically at the same time, before the head of security added: "With an interview like that, how can we possibly say no? I can't wait to be working with you!"

Laura bumped her shoulder against his. Actually, she was really looking forward to work with Happy too.

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Ever since she had come online, Friday had worked on a little project. Independently, without anyone ordering her to. It had taken her almost eight months to complete her research, but it had been worth it. When she had finally presented it to the Boss, he had started feeling slightly better about himself.

She looked down at the manila folder she was holding in her hands: now, her little side project would serve another purpose.

Outside the second interrogation room, Vision was looking through the observation glass at Wanda's sulking figure, debating if it was wise to enter the room or not. After all that had happened, he couldn't really discern what he felt for her.

She was still wearing her battle uniform, minus the long coat. Her hands were cuffed behind her back and the power suppressing collar was once again around her neck. However, Friday supposed as she joined the android, it was still better than the straitjacket they had put on her at the Raft.

"Are you alright?"

Friday's voice distracted Vision from his thoughts: "I am, yes. Thank you for asking. I'm trying to come to a conclusion about whether I should be the one interrogating Wanda or not. I can resist her powers, but with the power suppressor it is irrelevant. Given our connection through the Mind Stone and our previous rapport I may be able to form an empathic bond with her, but I'm afraid she would use it to her advantage, I cannot deduce how she would react."

"Vision, take a break," Friday interrupted. The android stopped, frustration evident on his face.

Friday looked up at him with concerned eyes: "You can't decide if you want to see her or not, do you?"

Vision nodded: "I felt something for her, before. But now I find that my feelings were largely illogical and... wrong. I grossly misjudged her."

Friday rubbed his arm: "You are angry, and confused. I would be too," she said.

Vision looked down: "Part of me wants to confront her. She made a fool of me once in this very Compound, leading me to believe... no, not to believe, but to hope my illogical feelings were reciprocated, before outright attacking me in order to escape. Then she made a fool of me again in Leipzig, saying she was sorry for her actions. She caused me to grow distracted and injure Colonel Rhodes... and in Pennsylvania, she illustrated to me very clearly how sorry she was..."

Friday tipped her head to the side, prodding him to continue. He raised his eyes back to the interrogation glass, and this time, they held nothing but disappointment: "I would have still forgiven
her, before our last encounter. But when I asked her to desist, she attacked me once more, without any consideration for the safety of the hostages, her teammates or even herself. She is a danger, to herself and everyone else. I would like to confront her, but at the same time I don't want to so much as look in her direction. I refuse to. Now, she only disgusts me."

Friday nodded: "Well, I managed to counter her powers. Now that I know how they're like, she won't be able to make me see things again. I'll deal with her for now. If you decide you want to confront her you can still do it later, alright?"

Vision looked at her and nodded once, smiling. She smiled back before turning around to go to the adjacent room.

"Is that file what I think it is?" Vision asked, referring to the folder in her hands.

Friday looked at him and then at the folder: "She needs to face the truth," Friday answered simply.

Vision nodded his agreement.

***

Wanda started glaring daggers at her as soon as Friday entered the room: "You're the girl from the nuclear powerplant..." she said.

So despite the collar, apparently she could still leak her powers slightly. Enough to peek in people's minds.

Better this way, Friday thought. At least, she can't accuse me of lying to her.

"Perceptive. Friday Stark, nice to properly meet you," Friday answered cordially, sitting down in front of her and placing the envelope on the table.

"Stark, huh?" Wanda knew this freak had something to do with him: "What exactly are you?" she asked.

Friday decided to just tell her without - for now - picking up on her hostility: "I was created as a sentient AI to replace the one known as Jarvis. Later on, an accident gave me a synthetic human body. And now, here I am."

"So Stark created another Ultron. Only this time he gave it a pretty face to make it friendlier," Wanda accused.

For a moment, Friday just looked her in the eye. Then she scoffed, shaking her head: "I'm going to enjoy this far more than I should," she whispered to herself.

Wanda hadn't heard: "What did you say?"

Friday shrugged, waving her hand dismissively: "Nothing. Miss Maximoff, I'm here to ask for your cooperation in apprehending international terrorists," she stated.

At that, Wanda lost her cool: "We aren't terrorists! We are heroes! We help people!"

"By drowning them in their worst fears?" Friday asked calmly.

Wanda wanted to retort, but then she remembered she had been told by Steve and Clint not to rise to any bait if she was ever captured before they could clear their names. She leaned back in her chair: "I am not saying anything else without a lawyer."
"Good. You don't have to say anything, you have to listen," Friday retorted, opening her manila folder. She produced a photograph: "Recognize this?"

Wanda's blood went cold.

It was a photograph of the unexploded Stark Industries shell that had trapped her and her brother in their apartment with their dead parents. She would recognize it everywhere, the image was burned into her mind: "Yes. I recognize it," she said, not giving anything away and trying to hide how much that photograph unsettled her.

"As soon as my Boss activated me, I noticed several strong hints of distress in his behavioural pattern. Searching for information about the origin of this distress, I learned about your family." Friday explained, "Boss was feeling guilty about your past. That was his main cause of distress. That was the reason why he never exposed your involvement in Ultron."

Wanda glared at her, but didn't deny the accusation. The other girl continued: "He had abandoned the project, did you know that? But then you came around and played with his mind. You made him so desperate that he tried to make it work by integrating it with alien technology..."

Wanda scoffed dismissively. She didn't know Stark had abandoned the idea of Ultron, but that didn't change anything: "So what if he had abandoned it? Does that mean he should be absolved of all blame? He still killed my parents! He damn well deserves the guilt he is feeling!" she snapped.

Friday leaned forward, narrowing her eyes like a predator ready to attack: "Well, that's the point: he actually doesn't," she said simply, pulling a second photograph from the folder and placing it in front of Wanda. This one looked like a magnified detail of the previous one: it showed a string of letters and numbers written on a slightly bent piece of metal that seemed to be from the outer casing of the shell.

"What is it?" Wanda wanted to know.

"That, my dear witch, is the serial number of the bomb in question. You see, I have access to all the data regarding Stark Industries, and I know that the weapons division only sold its goods to the United States Armed Forces and allied governments. Which begs the tantalizing question: how did a Stark Industries S-class mortar shell end up in Sokovia? The Soviet Union had annexed the region shortly after World War Two. Germany had it before that. And ever since the USSR fell and Sokovia became independent, riots and revolutions became a routine, but the country was still under Russian influence. Neither the US Army nor the NATO ever had anything to do with it..." Friday explained conversationally.

Wanda was losing her patience. She already knew the history of her country, she didn't need an academic lecture about it: "What is your point!?" she asked crossly.

Again, Friday reached into her folder, producing yet another picture. This time, it was the photo of a well dressed man in his sixties. He was completely bald and sported a salt and pepper beard. His eyes were cold and calculating, his expression was ruthless and malevolent.

"Meet Obadiah Stane," Friday introduced, "Chairman Executive Officer of Stark Industries from december 1991 to june 1993, senior member of the Directive Board and most importantly, a really greedy asshole. This man used his position in Boss' company to sell SI weapons under the table to various individuals, many of which were running less than legal activities. Which brings us back to the shell in your apartment..."

Wanda was starting to feel a knot forming in her throat. She really didn't like where this conversation
seemed to be heading, but she didn't know what to say to make it stop.

Friday continued: "I tracked that shell. It was an absolute pain in the rear, especially considering the situation Sokovia has always been in. But I'm very good at this. I am methodic, and patient. And, just like you were motivated to make Boss suffer, I was motivated to make him feel better. In the end, I found what I was looking for."

She produced two other documents from the folder. They both seemed to be official documents, but they were different: one of them was an inventory of some sort, the other seemed to be a shipment order. Both had the signature of Obadiah Stane, and on both papers, a number was circled with a red marker: it was the serial number of the bomb from her apartment.

"Stark Industries is the best at everything it does," Friday stated, "be it clean energy, advanced tech, or military armaments. That bomb was one of a series of payloads that didn't meet factory standards, and should have been detonated safely here in the States. But Mr. Stane saw an opportunity to make top dollars with rotten goods, and smuggled those weapons in Sokovia."

Wanda was looking at Friday with her eyes blown wide. The other girl leaned forward: "Obadiah Stane, not Tony Stark, is the one who profited from the weapons that killed your parents. Do you wanna know what happened to him?"

When Wanda didn't answer, Friday implacably continued: "He tried to have Boss assassinated during a business trip in Afghanistan. But, Boss escaped imprisonment and became Iron Man. A short time later, he uncovered Stane's secrets, and after a rather explosive confrontation... he killed him."

Wanda was now breathing heavily. She shook her head desperately in denial: "N-no... that's... you're lying..." she tried to say.

"Oh, come on. You can see inside my head. You know it's all true. Tony Stark killed the man who sold the weapons that killed your parents. And we haven't even gotten to the best part yet," Friday cackled.

Wanda wanted to deny everything, but Friday was right: she could see inside her mind, she knew she was telling the truth: "W-what do you mean- what best part?"

Friday smirked: "I didn't just trace the bombs back to Stane. I also managed to track down the buyer. See the receiver's signature here?" she asked, pointing at a signature beside Stane's on the shipment order.

Wanda's heart leaped in her throat as she looked in horror at the signature. The buyer of the weapons was-

"Alfred List," Friday supplied, "Hydra scientist, working at the direct orders of Baron Wolfgang Von Strucker. A doctor with a rather unhealthy obsession for human experimentation. I'm guessing you know him pretty well, don't you, Scarlet Witch?"

Wanda let out a hurt, strained noise.

List was the lead doctor of Strucker's team. He was the one who had personally performed the experiments on her and her brother. He was the one who had made them what they were. He was the man behind Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver.

And he was the true responsible for the death of her parents.
"No... No, no..." Wanda pleaded, shaking her head almost hysterically.

Friday just laughed: "Oh, yes. Definitely yes. And do you wanna hear the last fun fact?"

Wanda looked at her with an expression that seemed to be begging for mercy, but Friday was relentless: "When the Avengers first came to Sokovia to retrieve Loki's scepter, Iron Man was the first to breach Strucker's fortress. He found List trying to erase all of his research from the servers... as soon as he saw Iron Man, List tried to grab a gun... but Boss hit him with a repulsor, killing him instantly."

Wanda couldn't breathe. She desperately wanted it not to be true, but it was. She could see it in Friday's mind.

_Sixteen years... all this time... we were completely wrong..._

She looked down, unable to hold Friday's gaze anymore.

She had always blamed Stark for the death of her parents. Instead, he was the one who had killed both the true responsible.

_Oh God... what have I done..._

She felt sick. Tony Stark had avenged her parents. And she had twisted his mind, turned his life into a living hell. She had just let him shoulder all the blame for Ultron-

_But Stark had abandoned the project._

That sudden thought hit her worse than anything else.

Ultron wasn't Stark's fault. It was hers.

She let out another strangled cry. And then another, thrashing slightly against the handcuffs. And then a louder cry, as her face twisted in pain and her eyes squeezed shut...

_Pietro is dead because of Ultron._

She barely managed to turn to the side and bend forward before vomiting violently.

"Ew... Gross..." Friday flinched.

Wanda coughed a few times before throwing up again. As she hurled, tears started running down her face.

Her head was spinning so hard she eventually lost balance and fell from the chair, just barely avoiding the pool of vomit.

"Oh, for the love of... never mind. Let's call it a day," Friday said calmly, gathering her papers and standing up, completely unfazed by the show in front of her:

"Just to sum it all up, Hermione: Tony Stark is the one who truly avenged your parents. And you wanted to destroy him. You worked with your parents' true murderer to do it, became his lab rat, even. Then you pushed Boss into making Ultron so you could get your long awaited revenge, and your brother paid the ultimate price for it. Oh, and let's not forget the Grand Canyon-sized hole in your home country, that's kind of important too, considering it's also what caused Zemo to seek his own revenge. Everything Ultron did is your fault, and you know it, but you left Boss to take full..."
blame for it..."

Wanda just wanted Friday to stop, but the other girl was not done yet: "After that, you proceeded to live at the Boss' expenses, no doubt thinking he owed you for being the meanie who killed your family. Then, since you have powers but you don't know how to use them, you killed thirty-eight people in Lagos. So you were asked - not by Boss, but by Vision, who had always been nothing but kind to you - to stay at home until the heat diffused, but instead you decided to attack him and run away. You helped destroy an airport, you became a fugitive, and then you nearly caused a nuclear disaster."

Wanda was now on her knees, bent forward in an almost fetal position, and crying helplessly. Friday walked around the table, mindful to keep as far away as possible from the pool of sick.

She grabbed Wanda's hair, pulling harshly backwards, raising Wanda's head so she was looking her in the eye.

Wanda's expression was devastated, her make-up running down her eyes in black tear marks and her whole body quaking with desperate sobs.

Friday looked utterly disgusted, and for the most part it wasn't because of the horrible vomit stench: "And you say you are a hero? Who helps people?" she asked.

Wanda didn't answer. Couldn't answer.

"No. You're not a hero. You are a revolting, messed up freak. Nothing more."

Having said that, without waiting any longer, Friday let her go, turned on her heels and calmly left the room.

Left alone, Wanda just curled up in a ball on the floor and kept crying.

Chapter End Notes

As I said before in the comments, we are nearing the end of Clint's part of the story. He will appear again in a few future chapters, but he will no longer be of much relevance plot wise. Wanda, however, has just started her own sideplot. We'll see a lot more of her in the future.
Reacting to setbacks

Chapter Summary

Hank is pissed, Hope is depressed and Wanda is even more depressed. Oh, and Natasha and Clint's friendship ends.

Chapter Notes

In the comics, Isaiah Bradley is a black super soldier who gets injected with a serum similar to Steve Rogers in an experiment similar to Project Rebirth. Here he has a different, more complex role than just being hired grunt, kind of like how Zemo's role is different in the MCU than in the comics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"God fucking damn it!" Hank cursed, throwing a chair against the wall, so hard that one of the legs cracked when it hit the bricks.

Scott flinched at the outburst. Hank was usually a level-headed person, he didn't expect him to explode like that.

"Dr. Pym, please, calm down," Steve soothed, putting a hand on his shoulder in a show of comfort, "getting angry won't solve the situation."

Hank just shrugged it off: "There's absolutely nothing that will solve the situation, Captain! It all went to hell!"

Again, Scott flinched. He was slowly but steadily coming to the realization that he had been dragged into something way bigger than him. God, he had been so clueless.

Hank was continuing his tirade: "They took two of your men! They took Scarlet Witch, who was probably the most powerful of your team, and Hawkeye, who was the scout alerting you of ambushes and stray enemies! At least so far, you could counter their advantage in firepower with numerical superiority! But now? If you go against Stark's team like this, they're gonna squash you!"

"We'll manage," Steve reassured him, fully believing it, "we'll try to avoid getting in contact with Tony's team for the time being, while we search for where they're holding Clint and Wanda, and then we'll work out a way of breaking them out. I've broken the whole team out on my own from a prison floating over the ocean, it won't be too difficult to break out two of them with the rest of the team's help. In the meantime," he stopped mid-sentence to grab Bucky's shoulder, "Bucky was a sniper too, back in the Army. He can do Clint's job just as well, if not better."

Bucky gave him an uncertain look. It was nice that Steve had so much faith in him, but sometimes his best friend's steamroller attitude overwhelmed him: was all this really necessary? All the fighting, all the destruction?
Now they had to hide from Stark and his team. Why couldn't Steve just try to work things out with him? Despite Siberia, Stark seemed like a reasonable guy. Why couldn't they just sit down and talk?

"Also, Scott's suit still packs quite a punch when he goes giant," Steve went on, "and then we have the Falcon with Redwing for air cover. Yes, we're a bit short-handed, but we can keep going like this for a while."

Hank scoffed: "You really don't get it, do you? First of all, the particles powering Scott's suit are limited. He's going to be able to run another... I don't know, six missions, seven tops. And that's if he doesn't go Giant Man: he's only got a couple more shots at that with the particles we managed to get away. The Falcon suit? How do you expect me to run maintenance on it, or your mag-shield, or your friend's arm for that matter, now that I don't have access to any lab or tools? Oh, and besides: you lost your jet! That was your only mean of transportation, wasn't it? And without Barton here, where are you going to get another one? I'm sorry, but if this shit goes any further south, you're gonna become Captain Antarctica!"

Steve's enthusiasm was starting to wane at Hank's status report. And the old engineer wasn't even done yet:

"Jesus Christ, I should have just kicked you out of my house when Scott brought you to me! Now I'm a fugitive from the United Nations and my own daughter's hunting me down! I'm way too old for this shit!" He sat down and raked his hands through his hair, then he took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose: "And you know whose fault this is?"

Sam rolled his eyes: "Lemme guess: Tony Stark?"

"Tony Stark," Hank confirmed, voice full of hatred, missing Sam's sarcasm completely: "First he makes an apocalyptic mess trying to build Skynet, and then he goes on a power trip talking about checks and balances and accountability!? He's the reason the Accords fucking exist in the first place! Why didn't you fucking kill him when you had the fucking chance in fucking Siberia? The world would be much better off without him!"

Steve flinched. Dr. Pym wasn't serious about that last part, was he?

"Tony is a good man. He had come to Siberia to help.-"

"Good man my ass!" Hank scoffed, "He royally screws up, and always comes out on the other side smelling like roses! God, I hate that! He's his father's son, through and through!"

No. That was definitely out of line. "Dr. Pym, I will not have you spewing gratuitous insults on Howard Stark like that. He was one of my closest friends, his help during the war was invaluable.""

"Have you ever heard that people change, Captain?" Hank interrupted him, "You've known Stark Senior for, what, three years? Well, I worked with him for more than twenty! During the war he might have been a decent guy, nice even, I didn't know him back then. But the Howard Stark I knew? He was a cold, machiavellic bastard who only cared about the end result!"

That gave Steve pause.

He had never thought about that.

Every time Tony had dismissed or even demeaned his father's memory and legacy, Steve had wanted to throttle him. He had always wondered how Tony could be so callous, so blind, so wrong, about Howard. How was it possible that he just couldn't see that Howard was a better man than Tony could ever be? He wondered if Tony actually did see how his father was so much better than him,
and liked to throw mud on his memory just so he could feel better with himself.

The Howard that Tony depicted was nothing like the man Steve had known. Steve remembered thinking Tony was so ungrateful, badmouthing his father like that.

But could it really be possible that the Howard Tony had known was actually different than the one Steve had been friends with?

One time, Tony had spitefully reminded Steve that, when he wasn't running Stark Industries, Howard was in the Arctic, looking for him. That Howard was too busy moping over a single MIA soldier to raise a son.

Was it really his fault? Was he the cause of Tony's relationship with his father being what it was?

It didn't make sense. Tony did care for Howard! Why would he have attacked Bucky in Siberia if he didn't? Surely he could see the Howard Steve knew!

But Doctor Pym seemed to agree with Tony about Howard... God, why were things so complicated?

"We need to lay low for a while."

Bucky's words brought Steve back to the here and now. *Lay low?*

"What do you mean, Buck? What about Clint and Wanda? We can't leave-"

"Oh yes we can! We can and will, at least for now! We have to stay quiet and regroup!"

Steve was stunned by his best friend's outburst. He was about to protest when Sam spoke: "He's right, Steve. We have to stay under the radar until this blows over..."

"And you think this is ever going to blow over anytime soon?" That was again Dr. Pym.

Sam shook his head in return: "We have to hope it does," he said with a tone that really implied what he thought about their chances in the current situation.

Pym scratched his beard: "Well, you're right on one thing: we need to regroup. This place could be compromised, so we all need a new safe house and and I need a lab where I can work on your stuff."

"You have any ideas, Hank?" Scott spoke for the first time since Sam had returned, bringing Dr. Pym along.

Pym nodded, staring in the distance: "I've gotta make a few calls."

As Scott handed him a burner phone, Steve decided to hold off on his protests about Hank suddenly overstepping him. What the hell, he was the team leader, he should be the one to decide! Now suddenly they all thought they knew better than him? But they were right, they did need a new place to stay. Once they had found it, they would all sit down and have a long conversation about authority and the chain of command.

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"Sir, you know how much I respect you and the organization you represent. I agree wholeheartedly with your work and what you stand for, but in this case, I'm gonna have to say no. And by no, I mean: Hell no!" Tony growled at the screen where Isaiah Bradley, the new American delegate of the Sokovia Accords Central Committee after Ross' demise, was in video call with him.
Bradley was a rather mysterious person: other than the fact that he was an Army Captain from Baltimore who had served in the first Desert Storm, there was very little to be found about him on the net. It was also kind of weird that a simple Captain held such a position in the Accords Committee. But he had served under General Sawyer, the head of the US Subcommittee, and they were apparently good friends too. Sawyer seemed like a cool guy, so Tony was willing to give his friend the benefit of the doubt.

Also, it wasn't like this was Bradley's fault: this was a decision that had been made by the Committee at large; the poor guy was simply delivering the message.

Not that it was easy: Bradley shifted on his seat, clearly uncomfortable: "Mr. Stark, you have to understand that we don't have many alternatives, that's why we are asking-

"Didn't you hear what I just said? No! Downright fucking NO!" Tony seethed, "I'm not gonna keep Maximoff in my Compound any longer!" I don't want her here. Not after everything she's done. I don't want her anywhere near my family!

"This is the Avengers' headquarters, not a prison!" he continued, "You have a prison that was purpose-built for this kind of situations! Use it!

"We're going to," Bradley replied, "We have a team already en route to your Compound to collect Barton and escort him to the Raft. We can, theoretically, hold Maximoff there too, but, after what happened last time, we'd really rather not..."

"Security measures have been increased exponentially since Rogers broke her out," Tony objected, "he won't be able to do it again."

"Agreed, but-" Bradley stopped short. He took a deep breath before continuing: "Mr. Stark, you read the report of the breakout. You know what happened: as soon as the power suppressor was off her neck, Maximoff went on a rampage. Twenty-eight guards were hit by her powers, and nearly all of them suffered long lasting effect. To this day, they are still seeing things and having nightmares."

"Yes, I know all of that," Tony interjected, "That's all the more reason to keep her well away from a place where civilians-"

"One of those guards committed suicide two weeks ago," Bradley interrupted him.

Tony fell silent.

Bradley still looked apologetic when he resumed: "We can't connect this to Maximoff's attack without a reasonable doubt, but I'm ready to bet you she was the cause. Even if we put her in solitary confinement, the Raft personnel isn't capable of dealing with the Scarlet Witch should her powers break free again for whatever reason. The Avengers, on the other hand, have captured her twice already."

Tony just stared at Bradley's image. The delegate went on: "The Vision can counter her powers, and from what I've read in your report on the Susquehanna SES incident, so can Lady Iron. We can't and won't order you to hold Maximoff there, but there simply isn't another place where she could be detained effectively. The Committee is looking for a more permanent solution, but in the meantime we have to ask for your help with her preventive detention, at least until the end of her trial. It won't take more than three months. That's all we're asking...

Tony lowered his gaze for a second before pursing his lips and looking up at Bradley again: "The guard that killed himself... did he have family?"
Bradely, too, looked down: "The guard was a 'she', actually. Catherine Perry. And no, fortunately she didn't. Her mother was her only remaining close relative and she died last november..."

Tony nodded solemnly, looking down.

_The Avengers are the best qualified to deal with Wanda... Rogers was right about one thing: we protect people. The people running the Raft are no different._

After a long moment, Tony shook his head and sighed heavily. He looked back to the screen, defeated: "Twist my arm a little more, why don't you..."

Bradley smiled sadly: "I take it you're accepting the Committee's request?"

Tony narrowed his eyes: "Reluctantly. Very reluctantly. And I'm taking your word on this being only a temporary arrangement. Three months, Delegate Bradley. Not one second more."

"Thank you, Mr. Stark. We appreciate your help. As I said, we are already looking for a more permanent fix to the problem Maximoff poses."

Tony nodded once: "If it's all the same for the Committee, I am going to look into this situation myself..."

"By all means, do. We value your work and your opinion very much, Mr. Stark."

The connection was cut, and Tony leaned tiredly back in his chair.

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Natasha had to be quick.

She was waiting at the helipad of the Compound as the guards sent by the United Nations to extract Clint returned with their prisoner. It was the only chance she had.

Clint had made a lot of mistakes lately, but he was still her best friend. She had to try.

She approached them right before they entered the helicopter: "Clint..." she called.

He didn't seem to have noticed her presence until that moment, because when he looked at her, his bruised and battered face showed absolute surprise.

She didn't have time to explain, though: "Clint, don't be stupid... they won't ask you again. You have to give them Rogers' location now, it's your only chance."

The expression on his mangled face immediately changed from surprise to betrayal: "You!" he shouted, "What are you doing here!? Are you back with Stark now!?"

She reeled back as if he had hit her: "Clint... I'm on house arrest. They- Ross had captured me-" she tried to explain, but he cut her off:

"What? Ross!? Wait, so you- my family was almost taken by Ross! You sold them out!"

Natasha didn't even have time to open her mouth to deny. Clint was already struggling against the men sent to retrieve him: "Do you have no shame whatsoever? You sold out my family to save your ass after I gave you a second chance!?" he snarled.

Natasha couldn't even understand how he could get it so wrong, but she finally reacted: "How can
you possibly think that, even for a second!? Ross had kidnapped me! He tortured me! I held out as long as I could!"

"So it's true!" the archer yelled, "You did rat them out to Ross! You disgusting bitch! You owed me! I saved your life, and that's how you repay me!? Sending my family to the slaughterhouse!? I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!"

She didn't know how to answer him. In that moment, she didn't even recognize him.

This wasn't the Clint Barton who had brought her to SHIELD. Somewhere along the way, this man had changed completely. He had become the man who had welcomed Wanda in the Avengers, after she had attacked every single one of his teammates. He had become the man who had left his family after a single phone call. He had become the man who was accusing her of betraying him and his family like he didn't know her at all.

"Miss Romanoff, please step away from the prisoner," said one of the UN guards. She looked blankly in his direction, and complied.

He was gone from her.

She turned around with her shoulders hunched, slowly walking back towards the Compound.

Her best friend was gone from her.

Behind her, she could still hear him shout all kinds of insults as he was manhandled towards the helicopter: "So now you're back to sucking Stark's cock, huh? You've crawled back to him like the slimy worm you are, haven't you!? Did you have to give him your ass to convince him not to throw you in a supermax where you belong, you worthless slut? I bet it-"

"Tony saved your family, you ungrateful bastard!" Natasha snapped, turning around to face him and cutting his tirade, "and he only managed to save them because I warned him in time!"

Now it was Clint who was reeling. Natasha came closer again, her face showing nothing but hatred: "all of which would never have happened anyway, if you had just stayed at home like you were supposed to! The only reason your family was ever in danger in the first place is that you snapped at attention like a good little soldier as soon as Captain America called you!" she seethed, her jade eyes piercing Clint's blue ones.

She broke eye contact first, snapping back around and walking briskly towards the building.

Behind her, she heard some sounds. A few ruffled movements. The door of the helicopter closing. The engines starting. Natasha just kept walking, never looking back.

A lone tear slipped down her left eye.

He was gone from her.

She was completely devastated. But somehow, a small part of her felt like a weight had been lifted off her chest. As if this confrontation had been a long time in coming.

He was gone from her, but it had happened a long time ago. And she had only just realized it.

***

As soon as they had landed back at the Compound, Hope had locked herself in her room, lying
down on her bed and just staring at the ceiling.

Her father had betrayed her. *Again.*

After everything. After Cross, after he had finally told her the truth about her mother. After she had given him a second chance. He had *still* decided to betray her.

And now, she was the one who had to deal with the consequences.

They would have to release a press statement about Barton and Maximoff's capture. And there was no way in hell that they could keep Hank's involvement secret.

She didn't even want to think about how this would affect Pym Technologies. The shares were going to plummet. Vertically plummet. *Plane-crash plummet.* There was no way to stop that. She wondered if it wouldn't be better to just save herself the trouble and declare bankruptcy immediately, just putting herself and all of PymTech's personnel out of their collective misery.

The sound of someone knocking at the door jostled her out of her passive state: "What?" she called.

"You still alive in there?" Stark's voice answered.

Oh, great. She really wasn't in the mood for 'TheTalk' right now. But he was the team leader, and she *had* screwed up royally...

"I just wanted to update you about Barton and Maximoff... Can I come in? It's kinda off putting to speak through a closed door..."

She furrowed her brow. *What? Just update me? Not give me a lecture?*

She had thought for sure he was going to ride her proverbial ass. Lay into her for being so stupid, maybe bring Rhodes along so he could gloat about being right...

She had heard about how Captain America constantly, and also very harshly, reproached Iron Man for not following his orders to a tee - actually for every single personal initiative Stark had ever taken, back when Rogers was at the helm of the Avengers. She was fully expecting Stark to have taken after him. Not that she didn't deserve it, in this case.

Instead he just wanted to inform her about Barton and Maximoff?

She got up and went to open the door, almost curious.

When she opened, Stark looked almost apologetic: "Can I come in?" he asked again. She blinked twice and moved to the side to let him enter. "Thanks," he murmured.

When they were seated at the table in Hope's suite, he reprised: "So, Barton has already been shipped to the Raft. He's looking at eighteen years in jail, minimum, and he can forget an early parole. He's no longer a problem. Maximoff though, different story there. We'll have to detain her here at the Compound for the duration of her trial. They're trying to find a way to detain her without endangering anyone in close proximity..."

"They're not gonna hold her at the Raft during her trial?" Hope asked, not really interested in the answer.

"No. Last time, when she broke free, she screwed the brains of twenty-eight guards. One of them committed suicide. The Avengers are better equipped to hold her..."
"That's fair, I guess. I'm sorry to hear about those guards."

"Yeah..."

An awkward silence fell between the two. After a few minutes, Hope just couldn't take it anymore: "We're not gonna talk about San Francisco?" she asked.

Again, Stark looked apologetic: "Well... catching Barton and Maximoff somewhat appeased the Committee, so they're not asking for your head on a silver platter... this time. But sooner or later, yes, we're gonna have to talk about it. I just didn't want to pressure you."

Hope let out a deep breath: "Might as well do it now. My father completely screwed me over..."

"Alright then. Tell me your side of the story. From the start and without omissions, please" Tony said. His tone was firm, but he didn't try to look threatening or impose himself. He was just listening.

Hope actually felt encouraged: "I... My father and I have a pretty troubled history. I was seven years old when my mother, the original Wasp, went MIA during a SHIELD mission. My father promptly shipped me off to boarding school and refused to tell me anything about it, said she had died in a plane crash... I knew he was lying. Every time he tried to shove that pathetic cover-up story down my throat, I would see red..."

"... I'm sorry to hear that" Stark said. He didn't prompt her to continue or urge her to get to the point. He just listened intently.

"Three years ago, we had to deal with Darren Cross. I'm sure you already know all the details. That's when my father started to come around... he finally told me the truth about my mother, he stopped trying to push me away... he was finally letting me back into his life..." she continued, looking down, "I thought I finally had my father back..."

"That's why you snapped at Rhodes when he accused PymTech, right?" Stark said, looking down himself.

"Partly, yes. But there was also another reason, that I hadn't considered before" she confessed. Tony's eyes got back up to her: "what is it?"

Hope breathed heavily: "Scott went giant in Leipzig. Then he did it again in Pennsylvania. There was no way he could have pulled that off without refueling..."

"So you knew something was off when you left the meeting," Tony surmised.

Hope's cheeks colored in shame: "Yes. I wanted to check by myself before letting the team know, after all the problem was either inside my own family or inside PymTech."

"I get that. I understand why you did it, but you still should have come clean," Tony replied. Hope was almost stunned by the lack of accusation in his voice.

"I know. I'm sorry. When I called Jim to help, it was only to investigate. We weren't supposed to get into a fight with Rogers' team-"

"But you did," Tony interrupted her. This time the accusation was there: "You know what would have happened if I hadn't followed you? Maximoff would have squished you, or Barton would have stuffed you full of arrows, or Falcon would have... Falcon Punched you or whatever. Point is, you and Sargeant Paxton would have had your asses handed to you."
Hope felt lower than dirt: "Are you gonna throw me off the team?"

Tony shrugged: "I don't know, should I?"

Hope smiled a self-deprecating smile: "I think it's a moot point anyway: this is gonna cause a massive fallout for PymTech. I'm gonna have to deal with this disaster for God knows how long, I don't think I'll ever have the time or resources to get back out there with you guys ever again."

Tony scratched his eyebrow slightly: "Stark Industries can help with that. If you agree to it, of course. I can call Pepper and you two can work something out..."

Hope was confused: "You would do that? Why?"

Tony shrugged again: "You're a good resource for the team. And most of Rogers' crew is still out there. I'm not so arrogant that I won't admit I could use your help."

Now she was really taken aback: "I... I don't know what to say... Thank-"

"Don't thank me yet," Tony stopped her, raising a hand, "you're off the hook only 'cause we caught two of them. You pull that shit again, I don't care even if we catch them all as a result, I will bench you so fast your head will spin. And the Committee won't be so lenient either. I need to be able to trust you, both in the field and out of it. I've already worked with people I shouldn't have trusted, and I'm not exactly keen on doing it again. Are we clear?"

"I think that goes without saying."

"Good. Now, can you think of any lead whatsoever that could get us to Lang or your father?"

Hope thought about it for a moment: "You know, it's a bit of a long shot, but I might have an idea..."

***

Wanda had been thrown in a cell in a sublevel of the Compound she didn't even know existed, three floors underground. Her hands were no longer cuffed, but the collar was still around her neck. Without her powers, there was no way she could take it off with her bare hands.

She wasn't sure she wanted to.

Once in the cell, she had just curled in a fetal position in a corner next to the bed, and hadn't moved since. She could feel her powers tingling inside her, almost fighting to be released. And she hated it.

Those powers came from Hydra. From the people who had killed her parents. The girl - Friday, was it? She was right about her. She was a revolting, messed up freak.

How could she have been so wrong? For so long?

Stark was innocent. God, he was innocent. He even killed the true responsibles of her parents' death.

What else had she been wrong about?

Maybe she had also been wrong about the Accords. They hadn't stopped the Avengers from intervening in that nuclear powerplant, after all.

And maybe, Stark had also been right about keeping her indoors after Lagos. The Compound was definitely a much better accomodation than the Raft, that was for sure.
She thought about Vision. He probably hated her right now.

When Clint had come to 'rescue' her, Vision hadn't even fought back, He had just let Clint hit him. And even when she had attacked him, he still hadn't laid a finger on her. Instead, she had thrown him down to the bottom of the Compound.

R**evolting, messed up freak.** She didn't deserve Vision.

She was even starting to suspect Stark himself was a better person than she was. He had given her a second chance, he had housed her, fed her, clothed her. He had taken full responsibility for Ultron... and he had never blamed her when he would have had all the right to do so. And how had she repaid him? She had nearly destroyed his life.

After a long time, the door opened. Friday was there, and she didn't look happy.

As Wanda got to her feet, Friday scoffed: "So," she started, "you really like being troublesome, don't you?"

Wanda didn't answer.

"Apparently you're so dangerous they don't even want to throw you back in the Raft. They asked for the Avengers to babysit you for the duration of your trial or until they find a better way to contain you, which means you're gonna be our problem for a little while longer" Friday said, then she immediately corrected herself: "Oh wait, sorry: my problem for a little while longer. See, Vision and I are the only ones who can resist your powers... but he doesn't really want to deal with you anymore. And I'm just willing enough to oblige him."

Wanda felt like she had been stabbed: Vision...

Friday got closer: "And thus, joy oh joy, I'm your new handler. Or... jailer, if you prefer. So I'm warning you now: at the first inconvenience, I'm gonna make the Raft look like a five star hotel." She came up to her and got three inches away from her face: "Come on, Ms. Maximoff, inconvenience me. I dare you." she seethed.

Wanda didn't know why, but this girl scared her. Friday scoffed and got back to the exit: "I'll bring you dinner in a couple of hours. Maybe. If I'll feel like it. We'll see." she said, closing the door and locking it.

Wanda looked at her feet and sat down on her mat.

Find a way to contain her. As if she were a dangerous wild beast...

'It's an involuntary reaction in their amygdala. They can't help but be afraid of you.'

'I can't control their fear, only my own.'

'R**evolting, messed up freak.**

It was her own fault. She had chosen to build her entire life on a mistake. A lie.

They were gonna keep her at the Compound for now. Maybe it meant Stark still cared for her, at least a bit... he really was a better person than her.

But she could still make amends.

She could make things right. She had to.
Wanda being held at the Compound is a plot device: I'm not even close to being done making her suffer.
Chapter Summary

The Press is informed of the showdown in San Francisco... and is also given another little cookie.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I'm late. I apologize for that. I should have updated last week but the days from August 20 to September 4 were kinda hellish. It's getting better now though, so next chapter should be up in two weeks as usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wanda wasn't sleeping.

Four days ago, about two hours after she was thrown into her cell, the girl who had interrogated her - Friday Stark, Tony's daughter, her mind supplied - had informed her that she would be kept at the Compound under her personal supervision for the time being. Since then, Wanda had slept about an hour and a half in total.

She was obsessed. There was no point in denying that. She was truly and completely obsessed.

Two times a day, Friday came into her cell with her meals. Every time, Wanda used all the meager amount of her powers that was too much to contain for the suppressor collar, to look into the girl's head.

The first time, she searched for Vision. And what she found hit her like a punch in the stomach.

Vision hated her.

She saw in Friday's head the discussion she and Vision had had before her interrogation: 'Now, she only disgusts me', Vision had said, hatred in his voice. And it had really devastated her, because she now knew she deserved every bit of that hatred. She had thought she was doing the right thing. Instead she had been completely, undeniably wrong.

But that was also the reason why she couldn't let her despair get the better of her. She had sworn to herself that she was going to make things right. And that was exactly what she was gonna do. Maybe then, Vision would forgive her.

So the next time Friday had come, she had searched her mind looking not for Vision, but for Tony Stark.

What she found didn't hit her like a punch in the stomach. It hit her like a freight train.

She saw everything.
She saw memories that weren't Friday's, but of the AI that had preceded her, Jarvis. She saw why Tony had become Iron Man. She saw the palladium poisoning, the inception of the Avengers, the Chitauri invasion, the Mandarin incident, the hunt for Hydra... and Jarvis' death.

Then Friday's own memories started. There, Wanda saw Tony leaving the Avengers, the depression, Tony and his girlfriend taking a break in their relationship, the Accords and Ross and how Tony had tried to navigate through it all. She saw the Civil War, and how it had devastated him to have to fight against those he had considered friends.

And then she saw what happened in Siberia.

She saw Tony watching his parents being murdered in cold blood by sargeant Barnes. She saw Steve lying to his face about it. She saw the fight, all through Friday's feed from the Iron Man armor.

She felt first hand Friday's anguish when the armor had gone offline. She learned how those twenty-two hours and forty-one minutes had been the worst of Friday's life.

The sheer guilt and desolation all these memories caused Wanda almost made her feel physical pain. Each and every single one of those things had devastated Tony. The man was so hurt, so scarred, so unfathomably damaged...

She almost started crying right in front of Friday. Thankfully, the girl had thought Wanda was just trying once again to garner her pity and sympathy, and simply scoffed at her: "I told you before: those crocodile tears won't fool me. You can cut the drama, it's not gonna get you anywhere" she had said before leaving.

Left alone again, Wanda thought more about what she had just learned about Tony.

She found she could relate with him. She would never have guessed it, but... he was a kindred soul. Tony Stark, of all people, was just like her.

They had both suffered in very similar ways. Both had lost their families, and both were trying to atone for past misdeeds. Trying to do better.

How could she have been so blind that she never saw it?

She regretted so much not having given him the benefit of the doubt, not having tried to get to know him better before.

After that, everytime Friday came into her cell, she looked into her head to see more of Tony. After discovering that they were so alike, somehow she felt drawn to him. She wanted to know everything about him.

She slowly started to get to know the real Tony Stark. And he was amazing.

He was caring and giving. He loved his family fiercely, and he would do anything for them. The same went for his teammates... well, at least for his new teammates. The old ones had problems getting past his asshole mask. They never really got to see the incredible man beneath it.

She saw him with Friday and Ms. Potts, with Vision and Colonel Rhodes, with Happy Hogan, with Clint's family or with his team. He worked with them, made small talk, traded barbs, played with the children. Everyone who knew him - the real him, not the media facade - inevitably grew fond of him.

And she had to admit, she was no exception.
She had been right in thinking that Tony Stark was a much better person than she ever was, or would be. Goodness gracious, she had been such a blind fool. How could she never have noticed how wrong she had been before?

Burning hot shame kept washing over her every moment of those first few days. Of course, she had been blinded by her irrational hatred, and Tony had understandably gone on the defensive and put his walls up to protect himself from her, not letting her see the real him. And besides, Steve, Clint and the others hadn't really done anything to change her opinion: they were as blind as she was.

But despite trying to rationalize her behaviour like that, she still felt lower than dirt. The shame and self-loathing she was feeling was almost overwhelming.

In the end, she came to the conclusion that her only chance of redemption was earning Tony's forgiveness. If he could forgive her, maybe she wasn't beyond saving. Maybe there was still good in her.

She had to do right by him.

***

Many people thought Christine Everhart was a person without morals.

It wasn't true.

Sure, she wasn't above doing questionable things for a scoop, and she could be absolutely vicious in her interviews, even to people who didn't fully deserve the vitriol. But everything she did, she did it for the sake of finding the truth and always making sure justice was done. She wouldn't have left Vanity Fair for an equally well paid but much more taxing job at WHiH Newsfront otherwise.

So in her own right, Christine did have a moral compass, and it was a strong one.

Pepper Potts must have seen it, or she wouldn't have invited her at this upcoming Avengers press statement, sparing her the trouble of finding another way to get in. It sure as hell wasn't a personal favour, she and Ms. Potts weren't exactly friends...

The conference room of the Avengers Compound was huge, and yet it was stuffed full of reporters. Journalists of many different and prestigious newspapers and other media from all around the world were gathered there. Christine immediately understood that whatever news was gonna be released by the Avengers today, it was gonna be a big one.

After several minutes, Pepper Potts rose to the podium and caught their attention: "Good morning and thank you all for coming on such a short notice. Today the Avengers would like to update the media on the situation concerning the aftermath of the so-called 'Civil War' and the rogue faction known as 'Team Captain America'. There have been important developments that the Press, and the world, needs to be informed of."

_Oh, this is gonna be good_, Christine thought from where she was sat in the first row, as Tony Stark in the flesh took a seat next to the podium, along with the newest member of the Avengers, Hope Van Dyne. It was the first time Tony appeared in an Avengers press statement after the Civil War. So far, everything had been handled by Ms. Potts and the Stark Industries PR team. Christine could hardly wait.

"To this end, Hope Van Dyne, the latest superhero to join the Avengers under the codename 'Wasp', would like to release a statement," Ms. Potts continued, right before looking pointedly right at Christine: "She will not be taking any questions" Pepper concluded scathingly.
Normally, the reporter would have rolled her eyes at the CEO, and flat-out ignored her, asking all the questions she wanted. But she had been caught off guard: she had thought Tony Stark was gonna be the one speaking to the public, not the latest newbie. *He's probably gonna speak after Van Dyne,* Christine thought, *he has to speak up at some point, right? It's been months! Since before the Civil War! He has to have something to say by now... Why is he even here if he doesn't?*

In the meantime, Ms. Potts had left the podium, and Van Dyne had taken her place. She was looking down at the papers in her hands, almost fidgeting. Christine noticed that, while her expression was as professional and severe as usual, PymTech's CEO seemed nervous. She wasn't her default, crisp and confident self.

She had Christine's attention.

"Today is a good day for the Avengers," Van Dyne started, after squaring her shoulders and taking a deep breath, "but a rather sad day for me personally."

The journalists in the room had no time to ask themselves what she meant as Hope went on: "When I signed the Sokovia Accords and joined the Avengers, I did so not because I wanted to be a superhero, or because I felt that my contribution would make the world a better place. I joined the Avengers because of the actions of one Scott Lang, better known as Ant Man. Scott Lang is technologically enhanced by means of a suit that was developed by my father, Doctor Hank Pym, the founder of Pym Technologies. A suit that Lang used to infringe countless international laws, and to become, by all intents and purposes, a terrorist. As CEO of Pym Technologies, I felt I had a duty towards all those he wronged using the Ant Man suit. The Avengers, And Tony Stark first and foremost, were among this people. That is why I joined the Avengers: to atone for Scott Lang's mistakes."

There were murmurs and whispers among the reporters in the room. Christine was itching to shut them up so she could hear what Van Dyne had to say.

The woman in question continued: "Now, as most of you know, there has been a lot of bad blood between my father and the Stark family. Yet I thought, surely my father will be willing to let bygones be bygones in the light of his protege's actions in Leipzig. Surely he will see how Scott Lang is hurting his name and the name of our company with his conduct. When I discussed my decision to join the Avengers with my father, however, he voiced his disapproval, although he didn't actively try to make me change my mind."

This was getting irritating for Christine. She hadn't come here to listen to Van Dyne's familiar problems, but she guessed she could keep quiet for a little while longer.

"Shortly after our first confrontation with 'Team Captain America' at the Susquehanna SES in Berwick, Pennsylvania, I had a meeting with the rest of the Avengers, where we came to the conclusion that the team led by Steve Rogers had to have found a benefactor that was funding them and resupplying them... Colonel James Rhodes, War Machine, suggested that either my father or Pym Technologies could be behind it."

Christine was left slightly stunned. She thought she knew now where this was going. *So she does have something important to say...*

"I got angry. I refused to believe, even for a second, that my father or my company was involved with international terrorists. I left the meeting and boarded a plane back to San Francisco, determined to prove those accusations false. Now that I have the benefit of hindsight, now that I can look back at the situation with a cool head, and most importantly now that I know how the events would unfold, I realize how wrong it was of me to react like I did."
Another pause. The whispers among the journalists were increasing quite a bit.

"Once in San Francisco, I enlisted the help of SFPD Sargeant James Paxton, who had been involved in the Jellowjacket incident back in 2015, to investigate the matter at hand..."

Hope took a moment to collect herself before continuing: "Two days later, Sargeant Paxton proved Colonel Rhodes right."

Exclamations of surprise exploded in the room. It took a good three minutes for the reporters to calm down and let Hope continue:

"Sargeant Paxton tailed my father to a public park in the outskirts of San Francisco, in the middle of the night. There, my father met with former Avengers Sam Wilson, Clint Barton and Wanda Maximoff. Their interaction proved undeniably that the rogue Avengers' benefactor was indeed him."

Christine was now shocked. This poor woman had had to watch her father stab her in the back, working with the people she was fighting against.

She was dying to ask what had happened next, but she knew she didn't have to.

Hope went on: "At this point, both Sargeant Paxton and I intervened. It was foolish of me to attack three former Avengers with only the help of a lone police officer armed only with a standard issue sidearm and taser, but what I had just seen had clouded my judgement. I had to stop that... that criminal act from going on any longer. So I attacked, realizing almost immediately how terrible an idea it was: Wilson, Barton and Maximoff were not holding anything back. They fought us all out, showing no scruples at, potentially, seriously harming or maybe even killing a baseline civilian, or me. In that moment, I truly feared for mine and Sgt. Paxton's lives. Had the fight continued as it had started, I have no doubt that we would have been grievously hurt or worse, right in front of my father's eyes. My father who was just standing there, doing nothing. Saying nothing."

There was hatred in her voice at this point. And also disappointment. Most of the reporters in the room were stunned into silence by now, even more when Hope looked up at them with a sad smile:

"Luckily, Iron Man saved me from my own stupidity."

Christine perked up, shifting her gaze to Tony, as did most of her colleagues. But Tony just remained where he was, seated next to Pepper, texting on his phone.

Hope hadn't finished: "Mr. Stark, finding my behaviour suspicious, had followed me to San Francisco, keeping an eye on me from a distance just like Sgt. Paxton and I were doing with my father. As a result shortly after we attacked the fugitives, he was able to intervene in our aid, turning the odds in our favor. In the ensuing fight, Iron Man and I were able to apprehend Scarlet Witch and Hawkeye, and also liberate Sgt. Paxton, who in the mean time had been taken hostage by Barton in an effort to facilitate his and his compatriots' escape. Sam Wilson, the Falcon, managed to run off, taking my father with him."

Now the whispers exploded to full on chatter. The journalists were exchanging impressed and heated comments, wanting to know more.

Hope had to wait for a long moment before she was able to speak again: "Barton and Maximoff are currently in custody, and will soon be put on trial for international terrorism, criminal assault, trespassing, destruction of property and several other charges for their actions in Leipzig, Germany and in Berwick, Pennsylvania. The rest of the so-called 'Team Captain America' is still at large, now
presumably along with Hank Pym. I want to stress out that Dr. Pym is not, in any way, shape or form, acting against his free will in aiding and abetting Rogers and his team. Therefore, he should not be judged any differently than them."

Ouch, Christine thought, I sense a lot of pre-existing daddy issues here...

"There is one more thing I want to address, and it's the fallout that the skirmish in San Francisco will cause to Pym Technologies. Considering how the founder and former CEO of Pym Technologies is now confirmed to be involved with international terrorists, the stocks of my company are probably already dropping vertically as we speak. To prevent this from hitting PymTech too hard, I have brokered a deal with Stark Industries' CEO, Pepper Potts, and it's controlling shareholder, Tony Stark: Stark Industries will buy a non-controlling quota of Pym Technologies' shares, amounting to twenty-five per cent of the company's total value, at the market price those shares held two days ago. This deal has been already voted on and approved by the Directive Boards of both Companies, and has already been put in effect. Hopefully, it will keep Pym Technologies afloat despite Hank Pym's actions."

The tension in the room was electric. The journalists were now talking loudly among themselves, some impressed by Tony's willingness to help out the 'enemy', others giggling about how they would love to see Hank Pym's face when he got the news.

Van Dyne concluded: "As I said: today is a good day for the Avengers, but a sad day for me personally. My actions in San Francisco led to the capture of Clint Barton and Wanda Maximoff, but things could have taken a really ugly turn had Iron Man not been there to intervene. I stand before you, before Tony Stark, before my fellow Avengers and before the world, to admit my mistakes, to ask for your understanding and forgiveness, and to promise that I will not commit those mistakes again. I can, and will, be better than this."

She glanced in Tony's direction, to her right, as she said those words. Tony simply nodded once at her, solemnly. Hope turned back to her audience: "Thank you all for your time" she said, stepping down from the podium.

As usual, Christine was the one who recovered the fastest: "Ms. Van Dyne! Is there anything you want to personally say to your father?" she asked loudly as Hope was turning to leave.

The chattering of her colleagues had somewhat died down at Christine's question. She looked briefly in Tony and Ms. Potts' direction. Pepper was narrowing her eyes at her like a teacher trying to chastise an unruly kid, and Tony just smiled, whispering something in Pepper's ear. Probably something along the lines of 'I told you so' or 'Typical of Christine Everhart'.

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Hope, back on the podium and catching Christine's attention again, "Dad, ever since I have memory you always operated under one, absolute assumption: Stark is a synonym of evil. Look at where we are now: Iron Man saved me from being slaughtered by your associates. Stark Industries is saving your company from the disaster you caused. And Tony Stark has shown more understanding and empathy towards me than you ever did. He has already forgiven me for how I messed up trying to catch you and your terrorist friends. He listens to me and to the rest of his team, he accepts criticism, and he owns up to his mistakes."

Hope's eyes narrowed dangerously as she shook her head with contempt and looked straight into the nearest camera:

"Anthony Edward Stark is, by a landslide, a better man than you can possibly hope to become."

This time, even Christine was left speechless. The only noise that could be heard in the room was the
sound of Hope Van Dyne's high heels clicking on the floor as she walked away.

***

The video had gone viral in less than three seconds.

It looked like a recording from a cellphone or a tablet, but was a good enough definition that almost nobody questioned its authenticity.

It started with Iron Man and Lady Iron dropping from the sky and landing on the helipad of the Avengers Compound. Then, as they walked towards the building, both their helmets retracted, showing their faces.

The camera zoomed in on Lady Iron's face as she talked and laughed with Iron Man while they walked. The audio was too low to hear what they were saying, but the video got a ten seconds long glimpse at the mysterious Avenger's face before her and Tony disappeared inside the Compound.

Ever since her first mission, Lady Iron had been an Internet sensation. She had more hits on Google Search than any other Avenger, Iron Man included. She had more hits than Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga put together. So when this video went online, Youtube's servers nearly crashed. The same happened to several social networks, which positively exploded with reuploads of the twenty seconds video and comments and speculations about Lady Iron's true identity.

The next day all the newspapers in the United States had Lady Iron's helmet-less picture on the first page, followed by pages and pages of articles on the mysterious girl.

The news of Hawkeye and Scarlet Witch's capture was, in the best case, at page 4. PymTech's 19% drop in stock value and SI bailing it out was around pages 15 to 20, when it was mentioned. Some newspapers didn't talk about it at all.

Tony was holding a copy of a newspaper with a satisfied smirk. The main title was 'Lady Iron drops the mask!' with a gigantic picture of Friday's face right under it.

"Looks like it worked," he said, dropping the paper on the table, "for a while, all the paparazzi on the East Coast are going to chase down Friday. Should give PymTech a bit more room to breathe. They'll leave you guys alone for the most part."

Hope smiled at him, then looked at his daughter: "I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you enough, Friday. There's no going back now. Your face is out there."

Friday shrugged: "It doesn't change much, they still don't know who I really am. Plus, sooner or later the media was going to catch me out of the armor, anyway. Might as well use it to our advantage."

Hope just smiled gratefully: "Still, you weren't under any obligation to help me out. You didn't owe me anything."

"Yeah, you were very kind, Fri. Not saying I wouldn't have helped her, but I probably would have let her roast her butt on the coals for a few days before helping. Considering she didn't really deserve to be helped." came Rhodey's stern voice.

Hope's grateful and cheerful mood was instantly soured as she rolled her eyes at the Colonel: "Rhodes, I've already admitted that I was wrong and said I'm sorry. Publicly. To the Press. What else do you want?"

"Romanoff admitted she was wrong and said she was sorry for Leipzig, and yet it didn't save her
from two years of house arrest. But you just say 'I'm sorry, I'll do better next time', and suddenly it's all good..." Rhodey replied acidly.

"Okay, what the fuck is your problem!?" Hope asked, losing her patience.

"You are! I don't trust you as far as I can throw you! And considering the state of my legs, I can't really throw you very far!" Rhodey replied, nonplussed.

"Rhodey, come on now. Give the probie a break," intervened Tony in a light, joking tone, before the two started trying to mutilate each other, "Besides, Friday's outing took the media's attention away from Barton and Maximoff's capture too. The less people trying to find out where those two are being kept, the better. All the more difficult for Rogers to gather intel about it, right?"

Rhodey just scoffed, looking away: "Yeah, whatever..."

Hope's phone vibrated. She took it out and looked at it for a few seconds before turning to Tony: "It's Paxton. That lead on Scott I told you about, remember?"

Tony grew serious: "Yeah. Alright, go. I'll meet you there in two days."

Hope nodded and left the room. Rhodey called after her: "try not to pull a Rogers again, Ant Girl..."

Hope kept walking, giving Rhodey the middle finger without turning back, and nearly bumping into a newly arriving Sharon as she left the room.

Sharon eyed Hope's retreating form curiously before turning a questioning gaze at Tony.

Rhodey addressed her instead: "Sharry Bear, can you do me a solid and go to San Francisco with Tony in two days?" he asked her, as he used his crutches to stand up and walk away from the table.

Sharon blinked twice: "Uh... okay, sure... if you stop calling me Sharry Bear. Why do you want me to go with Tony, exactly?" Sharon queried, still confused.

"Because I don't want to leave Tony alone in Van Dyne's clutches," the airman said, limping out of the room without adding anything else.

Sharon watched him leave. She turned to Friday for answers, but the girl just shrugged: "I would go with Boss myself if he really needed protection, but this isn't an Avengers mission, just following a possible lead. It's highly unlikely Boss will be in any danger. So, I'd rather stay here and keep an eye on Maximoff instead. I can do it remotely, but I promised Vision he wouldn't have to deal with her, so if we need to physically intervene to restrain her, I'd prefer to be here and keep my word. Colonel Rhodes is just slightly overreacting to Ms. Van Dyne's actions a few days ago. And she's responding in kind, acting aggressively towards him."

Sharon smiled knowingly: "Huh. Well, I did notice some... tension... between them," she said.

She turned to Tony, who was smiling her exact same smile: "Yup. I noticed that 'tension' too..."

Friday gave them a quizzical look: "I fail to understand what... oh. Oooh!" She smiled too, finally taking the hint.

All three burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes
... a couple twists. Minor ones. A slightly more sizeable one will be in the next chapter.
*wink wink*. 

Nightmares and sweet dreams

Chapter Summary

A little interlude.

Chapter Notes

Slightly different chapter than the usual. I hope you enjoy...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve's head, chest, and right leg were hurting very badly. In the crash, he had probably broken some bones.

He opened his eyes slowly and tried to see out of the windshield, but it was completely smashed, nearly impossible to see through. All he could see, through a fissure where the windshield had actually split and not just cracked, was a glimpse of the twisted and bent hood of the car and the big tree they had crashed head-first against.

Oh, God... What happened?

He turned his head, slowly, and looked towards the driver's side of the car. The movement made the muscles in his neck contract in pain.

Bucky was there, hunched over the steering wheel. For a moment Steve feared the worst, but then, after a few incredibly long seconds, his best friend groaned in pain and straightened himself, leaning the back of his head against the seat's headrest.

"Buck, you okay?" Steve asked.

Bucky didn't answer. Why wasn't he answering? Where the hell are we, anyway?

He slowly and painfully turned his head in the other direction to look out of the side window. The impact had been so hard the window had shattered.

It looked like a secondary road. Trees were flanking it from both sides like a forest, along with a few lamp posts that bathed the street in a sickly yellow glow, the only thing contrasting the darkness of the pitch black night.

Suddenly, despite his ears still ringing from the crash, Steve heard something.

It sounded like an engine. And it was growing closer.

Thank God. They'll help us get out of here.

Sure enough, a headlight appeared in the distance. A motorcycle.
At first, it looked just like a tiny white dot, but as the bike approached it became almost blinding, like a torch pointed right at Steve's face. Mercifully, the biker stopped at some distance from their car, turning off both the engine and the light.

Steve couldn't really make out his appearance as he dismounted from the bike. He noticed he was dressed in black, tactical gear as he started walking calmly around the back of the car. Steve had a really bad feeling about this...

A noise from the driver's side had Steve turn his head so fast that it hurt even more than before. Bucky had managed to open his door and was trying to crawl out of the car. As soon as he was out, though, Bucky collapsed on his hands and knees.

Steve tried to get out and help him too, only to find that both his legs were stuck under the collapsed dashboard. To make matters worse, when he tried the door handle, he realized that in the crash, the door frame and the roof had bent, jamming the passenger door shut.

As he turned again towards Bucky, the sight made his heart leap in his throat: the man with the motorcycle unceremoniously grabbed Bucky by the hair, pulling his head backwards.

Steve tried to wiggle free, but it was no use.

"No! Stop! Leave him alone!" he shouted instead.

Surprisingly, the mysterious man did.

He released Bucky and, with the same leisurly pace as before, he walked back around the car to Steve's side. Steve could hear him approach from behind him. He was already mentally trying to get ready: he might be stuck in the car, but he wasn't gonna let this guy hurt Bucky without fighting.

However, all the fight left him completely, being instantly replaced by abject horror, as the man appeared from the car window and Steve could finally see his face.

"...Tony?" he whispered, surprised at how his voice sounded so pleading and broken.

Tony simply stared down at him as Steve took in his appearance. His face was just like it had been in Siberia: covered in blood, his facial muscles all taut with pure rage.

A destroyed arc reactor sat in the middle of his chest, horizontally broken in half, its flickering, dying light looking seconds away from disappearing completely. And then there was his left arm: it was chromed, shining metal.

"Who the hell is Tony?" he snarled, walking away from Steve and back around the car.

"No... No, no no no... Tony, wait..." Steve pleaded desperately. This couldn't be happening.

He was gonna kill Bucky. Tony was gonna kill him!

"Bucky, run! Run away, Buck! You gotta run! Get up!" Steve urged, turning back to Bucky. But it was no use: Bucky was still there, on his knees, completely defenseless.

"Tony, wait... you can't do this... Please, Tony, stop..." Steve tried again, now on the verge of tears.

Tony didn't listen: again, he grabbed Bucky by the hair. Again, he harshly pulled his head back. And then he opened his left hand right in front of Bucky's face...

There was a repulsor embedded in his metallic palm. It charged with the usual, ominous whine.
"Tony, please... He's my friend..." Steve pleaded one last time.

Tony hesitated.

For a moment, Steve thought he had gotten through to him. For a moment, he believed Tony had listened.

But then, Tony's voice shattered whatever illusion Steve was starting to believe to: "So was I," he whispered, firing the repulsor.

Bucky's head exploded. Blood flew everywhere, covering Steve's face in vermillion.

Steve woke up screaming.

***

The Winter Soldier was executing the mission with his usual, ruthless efficiency.

Everything had gone flawlessly so far: he had blown the front right tire of the car at the perfect moment for making it veer right against the tree. The timing had been perfect, and the sedan was now two feet shorter, front end completely destroyed.

Time to retrieve the package.

The Soldier got off his bike. He strolled to the back of the car, opening the trunk.

The package was there.

Perfect. If the Winter Soldier hadn't been completely incapable of feeling emotions, he would have felt gleeful right now. The mission had gone without a hitch. Maybe, they were not going to put him in the chair this time. Maybe they were just gonna put him back in cryo.

But then a loud noise of metal scraping over metal, followed by a dull thud, caught his attention.

The driver. He was still alive. He had managed to crawl out of the wrecked car.

The Winter Soldier narrowed his eyes.

The directives were clear: no witnesses.

He moved away from the back of the car and towards the man that was trying to crawl away from it. From him.

The Winter Soldier was completely incapable of feeling emotions, but a small, broken part of him, Bucky Barnes, was already feeling sorry for this man, and disgusted with himself.

Yet another victim.

But it had to be done: the Winter Soldier had received orders, and he had to follow them.

He couldn't shoot the man, or it wouldn't have looked like a car accident anymore. He had to punch him hard enough to kill him. One punch, and he would be dead immediately. Another just to make sure. The man wasn't going to suffer more than necessary.

He grabbed him by the hair, ready to finish him. He pulled his head back.
Horror sent him reeling as the Winter Soldier immediately receded, and Bucky Barnes instantly regained control of his body.

The man... he knew him...

_**Howard... no, not Howard. His son...**_

_**Howard's son... oh God...**_

Howard's son looked up at him. His face was covered in blood. But he didn't look like he was in pain. He was _smiling._

"What's wrong, Soldier? Not gonna finish what you started?" he growled.

Bucky stepped back in fear. _**Howard's son... Iron Man...**_

_**He's strong... too strong! He's gonna kill me!**_

As Bucky stepped back, the other man got up: "Aww, come on. You were doing great so far! What's eating you up now? Don't want to live with an entire family on your conscience?" he asked, still with that ominous smile on his face. But then, his expression changed completely.

His face went lax and pale. Deathly pale: "Well, it's too late for that..." he said, pointing a finger towards Bucky's left hand.

Bucky looked down at it.

In his hand, a still beating heart was slowly going still.

Bucky jumped in horror, dropping the terrifying organ. It contracted one last time before stopping completely.

With a supreme effort, Bucky tore his horrified gaze from the dead heart and looked back at Howard's son. That was when he realized everything had changed.

This wasn't a secondary road anymore. It was cold. They were indoors.

They were in Siberia.

Iron Man stood before him, walking towards him as Bucky stepped back in fear. Only then, upon a closer look, Bucky noted his appearance.

His armor was badly damaged. The helmet was missing, his face still bloody and deathly white. But the thing that captured Bucky's attention was the gaping hole in the chest plate, where the main power source was supposed to be.

Blood was seeping out of it, trickling down Stark's abdomen. The hole wasn't just in the suit. It was in his thorax. He could see the broken endings of the ribs at the sides. His sternum and heart were missing.

"You did this to me..." Stark seethed.

Bucky tore his transfixed eyes from the gruesome display on Stark's chest to look back at his face.

"You finally finished what you started all those years ago. You killed an entire family."
Bucky was horrified. No... no, I didn't- I only wanted to disable his suit! I- I can't have done that!

"Sargeant Barnes?"

The new voice coming from behind him made him jump and snap around. There, looking at him with the same lifeless and bloodied face as his son -the same face as when Bucky had killed him- was Howard. His old friend.

"Darling, is this Bucky?"

Yet another voice startled him, again coming from behind him.

Howard's wife. She, too, was covered in blood, and looked at him emotionlessly.

Bucky was surrounded by the three Starks. He didn't know where to run.

Howard's face twisted in a frown as he seemed to examine him closer. Paralyzed by equal parts fear and guilt, Bucky didn't even try and escape from that inspection.

Then, Howard frowned more. This time, it was stern: "No. This isn't Bucky," he said, "Bucky is dead. He died a long time ago. All that's left is the Winter Soldier."

For the first time, Bucky found his voice: "Howard-"

"The man that killed us all," Howard's wife interrupted him, "the man who massacred our entire family..." she said.

"Yes," Howard agreed, "The man who killed our son."

Bucky was desperate: "No... no, I didn't... I didn't kill your son, I didn't-"

"He must be stopped." This time, it was again Howard's son who talked: "We can't let him go. We can't let him destroy other families like he did with ours."

This time, Bucky didn't even have the time to react, as Howard grabbed his left, metal wrist and pulled at his arm, as his wife did the same with his flash and bone hand, pulling him in the opposite direction.

Bucky tried to struggle, but they were too strong. He couldn't move an inch. As they held him in place with his arm wide open, each holding the hand that had killed them, Iron Man positioned himself in front of him.

"No! Please!" Bucky pleaded, "I'm not the Winter Soldier! Please, Howard! I'm Bucky! I'm your friend!"

"You are the Winter Soldier." Iron Man contradicted him, raising a hand. His repulsor charged with that terrifying whine that scared Bucky to death: "and you must be stopped."

Iron Man fired.

Bucky woke with a start, sitting bolt upright in his bed.

***

After waiting for the sun to set and the darkness to come, Clint didn't have much time. He wanted more than anything to be able to stay, but what they were doing was too important. He would have
He was thanking God he had even managed to come home for a few hours. But he had to be cautious. That bastard Stark was still after them. And maybe he was lurking close right now, or he had someone watching from a distance. Goddamn traitor, forcing him to sneak into his own house like a thief...

Clint managed to sneak in from the back door. Without turning on the lights, he silently made his way upstairs, where the bedrooms were. Stark was not gonna stop him from seeing his children...

...except his children weren't there.

He looked into Cooper's room first: the bed was undone, and Coop's clothes were thrown haphazardly around the whole room, but there was no sign of him. When he tried Lila's bedroom, he found it in exactly the same state as her brother's, but Lila was nowhere to be seen.

A small twinge of fear was starting to creep down Clint's spine. The only bedroom left to check was his own, as Nate still had his crib there so he or Laura could be there if he needed it.

He opened the door and crept inside. The room was empty.

*Where the fuck are they?*

Then, all of a sudden, he heard a noise. He turned around drawing his bow and arrow, ready to fight.

The noise was coming from downstairs. From the kitchen.

Clint slowly made his way down the corridor and stairs.

That noise... it sounded like... giggling?

When he reached the kitchen, all was silent again. He tried to hold his breath and listen carefully for a few seconds, but the entire house was completely silent. He drew a breath and lowered his weapon.

"What are you doing here?"

The sudden voice startled him as he turned around.

Laura was there, right behind him. She looked angry. How did she sneak up on me like that? Clint thought.

"I asked you a question," Laura insisted. In the dim light of the dark kitchen, she looked ominous: "What are you doing here?"

Clint was confused: "What do you mean? I've come home. To see you and the kids..."

Laura tilted her head: "Oh, so now you care about us?"

Clint frowned: "What- of course I care! You're my family!"

His wife scoffed, smiling evilly: "Not anymore, we aren't. You left us to go chase Little Red Sokovian Hood's skirt, and you expect us to welcome you back home with open arms? No, Clint. It's way too late for that..."
That twinge of fear Clint had felt earlier grew like a tidal wave: "Laura... what do you... what are you..." he spluttered.

Laura sneered: "I've found someone else..." she said simply.

Just as Clint was about to react, another figure appeared from the darkness right behind Laura, enveloping her in a possessive hug: "Hey there, Barton!" Stark greeted with levity, a sneer on his face matching Laura's own.

Clint reeled back. He tried to raise his bow and arrow, but they were gone. Disappeared. All he could do was point an accusing finger at the newcomer: "You! What are you doing in my house!? Let her go this instant!"

Both Stark and Laura laughed good-heartedly: "And why should I, Legolas? I'm only doing what the lady asked of me..." Stark said, grabbing Laura's shirt and violently ripping it open.

Laura let out an exclamation of surprise, followed by an amused giggle, as Stark's hands started roaming over her body: "Mmmm... to think I could have dumped you right when you brought Tony here during Ultron... Instead I kept dragging around your dead weight for more than a year after that..." she moaned, as Stark cupped her breasts.

Clint was practically petrified by the display in front of him. Laura continued: "Thank God I finally left you... Going from you to him was like jumping from a tricicle onto a Quinjet. He makes me feel alive... As if I've been comatose the whole time I was with you and I've finally woken up..." she said dreamily, with her eyes closed.

Tony slipped his left hand under her bra, groping her right breast, and his right hand traveled down until it disappeared into Laura's jeans. She bit her lower lip, opening lust-filled eyes: "He satisfies me in ways your pathetic micropenis never could in a million years," she spat derisively.

Behind her, Stark lifted an eyebrow at him: "Want a demonstration?" he asked before licking Laura's neck.

Clint woke abruptly, drenched in sweat, finding himself in a white, aseptic cell.

***

"Three minutes. Get what you need."

Tony had hesitated when Rogers had said that. Everyone else had gone to gear up for battle immediately, including the Hydra Twins (and seriously, was no one else gonna remark that those two were trying to kill them not twenty-four hours earlier, and now they were lounging in his tower as if they were old friends?) but Tony had needed a few seconds to get his brain into gear and connect his legs to it to go prepare.

Jarvis was lost. Gone forever. This new character - Vision, they had taken to call him - was him, but... not. He was what was left of Jarvis, but he wasn't Jarvis.

It hurt.

It hurt like hell.

And it hurt even more when he got to his console and took out Jarvis' now irreparably compromised drive from the mainframe.
He tried not to think about it, to focus on the mission instead. Ultron was gonna come at them with everything he had: it was time to break out Mark 45. He also needed a new copilot. A new AI...

*Friday is by far the most advanced, he thought, even more than J in some aspects...*

*God, J is gone...*

"He is good."

That voice made him jump. He turned his head so fast he nearly got a cramp in his neck.

The Hydra girl was there. She was fidgeting with her hands, although it didn't look like she was trying to attack him. Actually, she looked... upset, about something.

"That... person, or whatever he is. He has a good heart. I can see it."

*Yeah. Thank you, Miss Obvious, I saw him lift Thor's hammer too, you know,* Tony thought, but he didn't say anything, just narrowing his eyes at her.

"I... I think he gets it from you," she continued awkwardly.

Tony scoffed: "If he got it from someone, it's from Jarvis. Definitely not from me," he said, turning back to the screen in front of him.

"Don't say that, Mr. Stark..." the girl replied, with a voice that sounded oddly pleading.

Tony once again turned on his stool to face her. The girl looked down, still fidgeting and looking very awkward: "I never met this Jarvis, but he sounds like a very good person. I... I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Stark. I-I know how much it hurts to lose a loved one... and I know that... this moment must be very difficult for you, and that... that I'm probably the last person you want to talk to right now... but... I wanted you to know that you... you shouldn't think you failed, or... or that you're wrong, and-"

"I'm sorry, is there a point that you're trying to make here?" he asked, tired of her babbling.

She winced slightly: "I guess... I... I wanted to say that I was wrong. Uh... about you. I- I was always so angry, and my anger sought a target. And you were it. I always thought... thought you were bad. But now that I can see you... the true you... you're nothing like the despicable man I thought you were. You... you're a good man, Mr. Stark. A good man."

She finally mustered up the courage to look him in the eye: "I wanted to tell you that. I can see the good in you, just like I can see it in the Vision" she added.

Tony would be lying if he said he wasn't taken aback. The girl looked down at her feet again: "I also wanted to apologize to you. For everything. I have wronged you, in more ways than one. But... I don't feel like I'm ready to ask for your forgiveness yet. Not with Ultron still on the loose."

Tony tilted his head as she once again looked up at him: "I will try to make it right. I'll fight with you. If we survive, I know I don't deserve it, but I hope you'll find it within yourself to forgive me. And if we don't make it... I wanted you to know, for what it's worth... I'm sorry."

Tony didn't know what to answer. She just gave him one last, tight smile before turning on her heels and leaving him alone.

*Huh. Validation AND an apology. That's new.*
Tony hadn't asked for neither of those things, but now that he got them... he actually felt a tiny bit better about himself.

Tony woke up feeling more rested than he had in months. He had slept really soundly that night.

He got up and started to get ready: he had to leave for San Francisco in a couple of hours, to meet with Hope and Paxton.

***

Wanda collapsed on her bed, out of breath and completely spent.

It was almost impossible, with that blasted suppressor around her neck, to gather enough power to reach Tony's mind. It didn't help that she was three stories underground and in a different part of the Compound. In the end, she felt completely drained.

But she had made it. She was exhausted, but she had managed to reach into his dreams and give him a nice memory. The spark of joy she felt from Tony in the end, albeit very small, had made it all worthwhile.

It was a start. She'll make it right, with time.

She smiled happily, closing her eyes, and drifted into a contented sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Just to point out, because it might not be very clear: Wanda only created Tony's dream. The nightmares the others had happened spontaneously.
Choices

Chapter Summary

Both teams start making their moves after the latest events.

Chapter Notes

Hank's old colleagues are OCs, both the two who appear in this chapter and two more who will appear later on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Stark Industries will buy a non-controlling quota of Pym Technologies' shares, amounting to twenty-five per cent of the company's total value, at the market price those shares held two days ago. This deal has been already voted on and approved by the Directive Boards of both Companies, and has already been put in effect. Hopefully, it will keep Pym Technologies afloat despite Hank Pym's actions."

Everyone in the room turned their worried gazes at Hank, as the TV displayed his daughter's statement.

They didn't have to wait long to see his reaction.

Hank's face went ghostly pale, his eyes impossibly wide, as his brain elaborated his daughter's words. The left corner of his upper lip twitched three times, right before his eyes rolled back into his skull and he lost consciousness, falling down from his chair.

Steve and Scott were at his sides in an instant. They got him laying supine as Steve set to check his pulse on his wrist.

Scott, already slightly panicking, patted his face gently: "Hank? C'mon man, don't be like that..."

Evidently, Scott's words were exactly what the older man needed to hear: Hank's eyes snapped open, and with remarkable agility for a man his age - especially one who had just fainted and was clearly borderline on having a stroke - he sat bolt upright gripping Scott's shirt collar with both hands before yelling: "Don't be like that!? Don't be like that!?!! It's my fucking company! The work of my entire life!! And my ungrateful, backstabbing, cranky daughter just sold it to that asshole Stark, of all people! And I don't have to be like that!" he bellowed, scaring the crap out of both Steve and Scott.

Bucky had also taken a step back, seeing him snap like that right after looking like he had just had a heart attack. Sam, on the other hand, tried to downplay it: "Well, she only sold twenty-five per cent of-"

"Shut your face, Wilson! You know nothing, so fuck you!" Hank cut him off, shouting even louder. His face, that had gone almost cadaveric as he had first heard the news, was now so red that it looked...
like he was asphyxiating. On some level, he probably was.

Steve stood up for his friend: "Dr. Pym, you need to calm down-"

"No, YOU need to calm down!" Hank yelled right at him, spluttering saliva all over his face, "and get your hands off me!" he continued, angrily shrugging off Steve and Scott's hands that were holding him upright and getting up on his feet.

He turned to the TV just as Hope's answer to Christine Everhart aired: "Anthony Edward Stark is, by a landslide, a better man than you can possibly hope to become." she said angrily, looking at him directly through the screen before turning on her heels and briskly walking out.

Hank stared at the TV like he wanted to incinerate it with his eyes. He was visibly shaking with rage, his hands balled into fists, his face cherry red with a pulsating vein bulging on his forehead.

After a long moment, he stiffly squared his shoulders, though the trembling didn't recede in the slightest. With considerable effort, he schooled his features into a sarcastic smile, even though he still looked like he had swallowed a bee. Or, in this case, a wasp.

He turned around, looking them all in the eye with that disgusted grin: "My own flesh and blood. Did you hear that?" he asked to no one in particular.

Nobody answered him. He turned back to the TV and scowled at it as if he wanted to scare it: "You guys need to teach her some manners..." he said, walking out of the room, leaving Steve stunned into silence, Scott nearly wetting his pants from the scare, Sam restraining himself from beating up an old man, and Bucky wondering how the heck he had ended up in that situation.

***

It hadn't been difficult to get in contact with his old colleagues. It had been difficult, however, to convince them to help.

Hank was currently sat on the passenger seat of a stolen minivan, in an underground public parking lot. He was tapping nervously on the inside of the door panel. His contact was already more than five minutes late...

Suddenly, a silver Range Rover appeared in front of them and approached slowly. It stopped right next to the minivan, so that the front passenger windows of the two cars were facing each other.

Hank rolled down his window, but he had to wait for a couple of seconds before the passenger of the SUV did the the same.

Inside the Range Rover were two men. The passenger looked about Hank's age, while the driver seemed maybe five years younger. Both had suspicious and unfriendly expressions.

"Todd, Liam, long time no see," Hank greeted, forcefully cheerful.

"Hank," the passenger of the Range Rover replied simply, not changing his expression.

Hank awkwardly took it upon himself to make some introductions. He turned to Steve, sitting on the driver side of the minivan: "Captain, these are my ex-SHIELD colleagues I told you about, Todd Sutherland and Liam Edwards. Guys, this is Captain Steve Rogers." he said. Steve only nodded to them.

The two newcomers narrowed their eyes: "Is he still a captain though?" the passenger, Sutherland,
scoffed, "I heard the Army is a bit pissed with him..."

"Just the Army?" the other man, Edwards, asked sarcastically to his friend.

"Look, there have been some pretty big misunderstandings," Steve intervened, "but we are the good guys. We're the Avengers, we fight for the people. And in this moment, we need your help."

"You're the Avengers?" Edwards asked, nearly laughing in his face, "Huh. And here I was thinking the Avengers were those sanctioned by the UN..."

Hank narrowed his eyes at them, speaking before Steve could: "Okay, we're going a little off topic here. We called you for help. Are you willing to help us?"

"Well, I'm not sure we should, Hank. No offence," said Sutherland, before his friend added: "Ever since SHIELD fell - and by the way, thank you very much, Rogers - we have over a dozen national and international intelligence agencies breathing down our necks. We've had to keep a low profile. So you see, helping international fugitives, the leader of whom actually put us out of a job in the first place, isn't exactly our gig..."

Steve was about to protest, but again Hank spoke before he could: "So you want to keep your heads down for the rest of your lives? Don't you want to be able to go outside without having to constantly look over your shoulder?"

They didn't answer. Hank pressed on: "Captain Rogers didn’t have a choice when he exposed Hydra. He had to act fast and there was only one way to do it. He put you out of a job, you say? Well, here he is, giving you a chance to get your life back. We'll show the world how corrupt Stark and the Accords are. And when we do, we'll be hailed as heroes. No more hiding, no more 'low profiles'. We're gonna do it with or without your help, but with it we'll be able to do it much faster and you would be given the consideration you deserve for helping us. So, you want in or not?"

Steve, for a moment, had wanted to protest. He had wanted to point out that Tony and his team were good people, they just didn't see the big picture. But actually, Hank's words seemed to get through to his old colleagues.

Edwards and Sutherland looked at each other seriously, whispering to each other. It was one of those occasions in which Steve really didn’t like having enhanced hearing:

“What do you think?” whispered Sutherland.

Edwards' eyes bulged slightly at his friend: “You’re not seriously considering helping Rogers of all people, right? He’s the one who screwed us over! Remember Rutherford and his family? They were all slaughtered because Rogers blew his cover!” he seethed.

Steve flinched as Sutherland replied: “I know. And believe me, I like this even less than you do. But Hank might have a point. After all, Rogers is the one who put us in this situation, it’s only fair he helps us getting out of it...”

After a moment, Edwards shook his head and raised his hands in surrender, before Sutherland turned back to Hank and Steve: "Follow us", was all he said, rolling his window up as Edwards started the engine of their car and pulled away.

Steve and Hank exchanged a triumphant smile as they followed. Steve felt a pang of guilt for this Rutherford agent that they had mentioned, but Hank was right: he had had no choice. Collateral damage happened, they had to accept that. He would formally apologize to Edwards, Sutherland and the rest of their colleagues as soon as he had the occasion. Actually, since they were willing to help
them, they probably saw his reason already.

***

Hope and Jim were sitting in the policeman's Crown Vic, waiting. They had been there for about ten minutes, enough that the engine had already started cooling off.

The nondescript, black sedan was great for stakeouts. The same could not be said for the torch red Ferrari 458 that roared down the street and came to a stop right in front of them. Tony and Sharon got out of it a moment later.

As Hope and Jim got out of their car, the girl shook her head, smiling: "You're not really familiar with the word 'subtle', are you?"

Tony smiled an amused smile, taking off his sunglasses: "I'm Tony Stark, _formichina_. I don't do subtle," he replied, before turning to Paxton: "Hey, Jim," he greeted cordially, holding out his hand.

"Hey, Tony," Paxton replied, taking his hand and smiling, "Don't listen to her. That's one hell of a car."

"Thanks! Hey, have you met Sharon? She's the Avengers' mascot..." Tony smiled, pointing at the blonde.

Sharon rolled her eyes fondly and held out her own hand: "I'm Sharon Carter. Tony's babysitter. Nice to meet you, Sargeant."

"Jim, please," he answered, shaking her hand.

"So, what are we here for?" Tony wanted to know after the introductions were dealt with.

Hope pointed to a decrepit van on the other side of the street: "The owner of that."

***

"Yo, guys!" Luis greeted, entering his apartment and tossing the keys on the credenza, "There's a wicked Ferrari parked downsta-"

He stopped short, seeing Dave and Kurt sitting grim-faced at the kitchen table, but four other people were also in the room: one of them was that cop who was now banging Scott's ex, then there was Scott's hot sorta girlfriend who had joined the Avengers (was she another ex now? The whole thing was screwy), another chick - blonde, also hot - who was reading a manila envelope, and...

"Dude, you Iron Man?" he asked incredulously, pointing a finger in Tony's direction.

"'S what they call me, dude. You Luis?" Tony replied, pointing at him in exactly the same way.

"...yeeeah?" Luis answered unconvincingly, looking at Dave and Kurt for a clue. They looked up at him as if they were falling from the clouds.

Luis did what he did best: he started babbling.

He turned to the cop: "Hey man, if this is about Dave driving your car against a tree last year when we dealt with Cross, you really didn't have to call the Avengers to kick our asses."

"It's not about the car," Paxton stopped him, raising a hand, "it's about Scott."
"What about him?" asked Dave.

"He's a fugitive, duh," Hope answered, "and we want to know where he is. I don't suppose you guys know anything that could help us?"

"No!" Luis answered way too quickly. All four of his guests narrowed their eyes at him.

Luis looked flustered for a moment, but recovered quickly: "And what if we did? You think we gon' help you catch Scotty? Ha! Ain't shit that you can do to make us talk!"

"Yeah, bro!" agreed Dave.

"Well said!" added Kurt.

Paxton was just about to point out that actually, there was something they could do to make them talk, like arresting them all for abetting an Interpol most wanted, for example. But they weren't done yet: "Scotty's a hero, ya know what I'm saying?" Luis went on, "Showed those schmucks at VistaCorp what for!"

"Yeah, dude! Dropped the Boss' Bentley into his pool too!" Dave backed him up.

"Hell yeah! And your fancy Ferrari should be parked right next to it, Iron Man!" Luis concluded. Dave and Kurt cheered and whooped in approval, and even high-fived.

Paxton was ready to arrest all three of them, but Sharon stopped him: "Hey, Luis, can I ask you a question?" she chimed in, not looking up from the file she was reading.

"What is it, Iron Man's concubine?"

Now Sharon looked so much so that Luis actually took a step back in fear. But she didn't press the matter: "I'm reading here that you met Lang in jail after you were arrested for stealing... two smoothie machines. Wow. Ok, whatever, doesn't matter. I wanted to ask you... that's your van downstairs, yes?"

"Yeah, what about it?" asked Luis confused.

"How would you feel if the owner of those smoothie machines took your van and threw it into a pool? I bet you wouldn't like it, would you? But following Lang's logic, you stole from him, so it's his right to throw your van into a pool, right?"

Luis was stunned speechless. Kurt turned to Dave with wide eyes: "Why does scary lady sound like she is talking sense!?" he whispered, slightly panicked.

"I dunno, man!" Dave replied, also shaken.

Luis reeled a few seconds before protesting: "Bu-bu but it was just two smoothie machines! 'S not like they're worth millions, like what VistaCorp stole!"

Sharon made a face: "Yeah, well... your van doesn't exactly have the same price tag as a Bentley either, does it? No offence..."

Scott's friends were left speechless. Hope decided to press them more: "My friend has a point there. In Germany, Scott smashed a Blauflug plane. But he doesn't have a car that Blauflug Airlines can seize and drop into a pool, so that's a problem... I mean, without a car to throw into a pool, they could try to hurt Scott himself for what he's done. Not only Blauflug Airlines, but also the Leipzig-
Halle Airport personnel, and those from the Susquehanna Steam Electric Station... hmm, how can we keep all these people from hurting Scott?"

"I have an idea!" Tony interjected, theatrically raising his hand: "Maybe we could detain him, and then... let a jury of his peers decide how he should pay for the damage he had done!"

"Hey, that's actually a great idea!" Paxton answered, feigning an incredible epiphany, "It would ensure justice for all the damaged parties, and also keep them from trying to attack Scott personally! What do you think, guys?" he finished, switching his gaze between Luis, Dave and Kurt.

"That's... that's..." Dave blabbed, incapable of coming up with any other words.

"He ain't gonna be judged by his peers anyway!" Luis then shrieked, finally coming up with a counterargument: "You rich boys will lobby your way in and sway the trials, we all know how it works!"

Tony had lost his patience: "Alright, let's cut the crap," he growled, stepping right in front of Luis, "You think your friend's a hero? Well let me break it up to you in a way you'll understand: Steve Rogers and his crew are considered terrorists by the United Nations! And not the nice, ethical hacker type terrorists, we're talking about the nasty, bombs in the streets type terrorists! Your friend nearly killed half my team in Leipzig, including the King of the most powerful country in all the African continent! And let me tell you, his associates aren't any better! Siberia aside, they nearly caused a Chernobyl reboot in Pennsylvania! You can read the official reports, it's all there! In fact, the Sokovia Accords Committee was ready to issue a kill order on them all after that snafu if the Avengers failed to capture them again! So, if Lang stays on that bandwagon, rest assured he's not gonna end well! Now, you wanna help us bring him in alive or would you rather hear on the news that they've bombed him with a drone or sniped his ass a la Osama Bin Laden?"

Luis just looked at him with his eyes wide, speechless. "Fine, have it your way," Tony said, turning to leave, "Let a Navy SEAL death squad handle this, see if I care. I've wasted enough time. Let's go, fellas!" he beckoned to Sharon, Hope and Paxton.

As the three moved to follow Tony, Luis finally found his voice: "Wait!" he called.

The four turned to him, and so did Dave and Kurt. Luis eyed Tony: "You gonna keep my man Scotty safe?" he asked.

"Yes. But to do that we have to bring him in," he answered.

"We also get something for helping out the Avengers?" Dave timidly tried to ask then.

"I won't arrest you all for being accomplices to terrorists. And for smacking my car onto a tree. How's that for a deal?" Paxton answered flatly.

Dave and Kurt winced. Luis looked down: "Last time he called me was right after you caught the archer guy and the magical chick. Asked about his daughter. If she knew anything of what had happened."

"Oh, now he cares," Paxton muttered.

Luis continued: "He told me they were holed up somewhere in Boston but they were gonna move out soon. Didn't say where."

Hope walked up to him: "We need the exact address. And you have to warn us immediately the next time he calls. Alright?"
Luis sighed in defeat: "Alright. I will. Just keep Scotty away from bombs and snipers."

"We'll do our best, Luis," Hope promised. Even though she was probably gonna make Scott wish he was killed by a bomb or a sniper when the right time came, she didn't want him dead. She wanted Scott - and her father - to pay for what they had done.

Luis nodded, defeated and miserable. But then he immediately cheered up: "Say, can I have your friend's phone number?" he said, winking to Sharon.

She looked at him like she wanted to vaporize him, again making him step back in fear.

After a few seconds, Tony broke the impasse: "Later, guys," he said, leaving the room.

Sharon and Hope followed, but Paxton stopped right in front of the door: "You still owe me a front bumper," he seethed to Dave before leaving.

***

As soon as they were back at the Compound, Sharon and Tony decided to hit the gym. Or rather, Sharon dragged him to the gym, saying she had to vent some repressed anger at Lang's buddy and she needed a sparring partner.

When they arrived, however, her anger was completely forgotten.

Natasha was there, beating a punching bag furiously.

It was almost scary to look at: she hadn't wrapped her hands, and her knuckles were bleeding. The bag itself was stained with blood, but she was just carrying on as if she didn't feel any pain at all. Her stance was a bit off, and her punches slightly sloppier than her usual, indicating her mind was elsewhere.

Her face was the most evident sign that something was off: she was the picture of pure rage.

"Natasha?" Sharon called. The other girl punched the bag one last time, even stronger than before, and started to leave without uttering a sound.

"Nat, what's wrong?" Sharon asked when the redhead passed her.

"Nothing. I'm fine," she growled, not looking either of them in the eye.

"You don't look fine to me," Tony interjected.

"Oh? And since when do you care!?" she snapped, turning to face him: "You made it pretty clear that you don't trust me anymore and never will again! To you I'm just some dead weight wasting space in your fancy Compound now, aren't I? So mind your own business, Stark!"

She was about to turn around again to leave, but Tony's voice stopped her: "Ah. Self deprecation. I'm pretty familiar with that... Now I know something's definitely wrong."

Again, Natasha seethed: "I said I'm fine," she insisted, "I don't need your help. I'm not some lost puppy that you have to take care of. I can deal with my problems on my own."

"And now you're pushing people away. Yup, you have a problem, alright..." Tony stated, perfectly poised.

Natasha just scowled for a moment, before snapping around towards the exit. But Tony grabbed her
"Leave me alone!" Natasha shouted, swinging her other punch at Tony. Predictably, his enhancements allowed him to catch it almost effortlessly, holding Natasha still.

"Let me go, Tony," she snarled, not trying to free herself but staring Tony down.

"Sure. After you tell us what's going on," he answered evenly.

"Let me go!" she hissed again. This time, her voice was broken, and her eyes were starting to get glassy with unshed tears.

"Nat..." called Sharon, worried.

That's when the redhead exploded: "I failed! Alright!? I completely, stupendously failed! At everything I was trying to do!"

Both Tony and Sharon were stunned. Neither of them had ever seen Natasha so off her game. So vulnerable.

They would have asked what she was talking about, but they didn't have to: "Clint, he accused me of selling his family out to Ross," she explained "and I might as well have done it: I tried to resist, but in the end that asshole got what he wanted. I failed Laura and the kids. Just like I failed the Avengers. I wanted to keep us together, and look where it landed us. Clint hates me. Rhodes is stuck in physio. Laura and the kids are homeless. I failed everyone... I hate it..."

She wasn't crying. Her voice was broken and she was trembling, but she **still** wasn't crying. Natasha was too strong to break down completely right in front of them.

Tony didn't let her go. He pulled her towards him, slowly hugging her. She went willingly, burying her face on his shoulder, and this was what made him the most uncomfortable. Because right then, she desperately needed to be comforted, but in that moment he didn't know what else to do, or say.

Sharon did, however: "Andrei Irtesi," she muttered, looking down.

Tony felt Natasha's head turn slightly in her direction, asking a silent question.

The blonde still didn't look up: "Romanian national, twenty-three years old. He lived in Bucharest and he owned a nice motorcycle. Which was bad, because apparently James Barnes likes motorcycles too."

Tony and Natasha had both turned towards her. Sharon shook her head in shame: "When he was running from Rogers and the police, Barnes threw him down from his bike, right under the cab that was following him. Andrei died on impact. Because the Winter Soldier wanted his bike."

She finally raised her head: "If I hadn't given Rogers our lead on Barnes, he would still be alive. Andrei Irtesi wasn't a soldier who was killed in a war, he was just a civilian who became collateral damage, because of me. He's dead because I was all starry-eyed in front of Captain America. And now, I will have to live the rest of my life knowing that it was my actions that led to his death. Knowing that he died because I allowed Rogers to put Barnes' life above his. Because I made a terrible mistake."

Natasha wasn't convinced yet: "I was trained to be the best," she muttered angrily, "in the Red Room, failure was unacceptable-"
"Failure is inevitable," Tont contradicted her, "we all fail at some point. It's impossible to never fail."
He thought of Yinsen, Charlie Spencer, Wanda's parents...

"The only thing we can do is learn from those failures, and make sure they don't happen again."

Sharon hugged them both, and finally, Natasha stopped trembling.

"Come on," Sharon said to Natasha when, after a long moment, they finally broke apart, "let's take a look at your hands."

***

There was a sense of finality as Tony was getting ready to leave. Everything he could see around him was his, but... not. He had paid for it, of course, but it felt like he didn't belong here. Not anymore.

Ultron was dealt with, but the media fallout? Different story. Much different. Him stepping down from the Avengers was the best way - the only way - to keep the sharks away from the team. Sure, he was gonna catch hell for this whole debacle, but he could handle it. He always had. Merchant of Death, and all.

But there was no place for him here anymore.

The team had moved on. There were new members, and despite some reservation, Tony knew they would be fine. He'd make sure of it.

Starting now: "You alright?" he asked Steve.

"I'm home," the Captain replied, nodding.

That was good enough. Tony smiled, satisfied, getting into his car as Steve turned away.

Just as he was about to leave, however, he spotted the Maximoff girl running towards him: "Mr. Stark!" she called, waving a hand as if to stop him from leaving.

She was wearing her new uniform. The one he paid for, just like he was paying for everything else when it came to her. Yeah, he still wasn't entirely happy about that, but he couldn't exactly equip all the other Avengers and say no only to her... besides, maybe Cap was right. Maybe she did deserve a second chance.

He sighed, rolled the window back down and turned off the engine: "Can I help you, Maximoff?" he asked as she approached the car.

She leaned down to him but, respectfully, didn't put her hand on the roof of the car, probably to keep her hands away from him and where he could see them, to show he didn't have bad intentions: "I just wanted to have the chance to thank you before you left. I don't know when we'll see each other again and you're a busy man... so, thank you, Mr. Stark. For everything. You did so much for me. A lot more than I deserve."

Tony was surprised, and also slightly put off. He still wasn't entirely comfortable around her: "You're welcome," he replied tightly, making to leave.

But she went on: "You might think I'm just thanking you to be polite, but I really mean it," she said.

Tony again turned to her. She looked away, straightening slightly: "After losing Pietro, I felt so
empty, as if my life had lost all meaning. But... you sought to my every need, you gave me a second chance... and the Avengers gave me a new purpose. A place where I can finally make some good. You don't realize it, but... you saved me, Mr. Stark. And for that, I will always be grateful."

That really left Tony speechless. He didn't expect any of that.

"So as I said... thank you," she concluded seriously. Then she smiled: "I would hug you, but that would probably be awkward..."

"Definitely awkward," Tony answered, returning her smile.

She giggled, amused: "Handshake?" she proposed, offering her hand.

"Less awkward," Tony agreed, taking her hand.

"Take care, Mr. Stark," she said, giving him a fond look, before turning away.

Tony watched her go. When he started the car again, after she had disappeared back in the Compound, he was smiling.

***

Wanda was completely drained and out of breath, but the sense of accomplishment she felt in that moment made her efforts entirely worth it.

It took all of her concentration to reach into Tony's dreams like that, especially with that damned collar, but earning forgiveness was always difficult. It had to be this way.

She had also been worried: for two days, she hadn't felt Tony's presence inside the Compound. He was gone, who knows where, and had only just returned today. Surely Friday wouldn't have told her, and Wanda knew better than to ask.

Why had he been gone?

She didn't want him gone. She wanted him close.

His presence was so comforting... It was the only thing that kept her going these days. Feeling Tony close to her. Knowing he had agreed to keep her with him, in his house.

If only he could actually be in the same room with her. So she could see him in person instead of just barely, faintly sensing him in the indefinite vicinity.

It would be so nice to see his face. Those big, warm, kind brown eyes. That perfectly trimmed facial hair. His tanned skin... Those perfect lips that would feel so good pressed against her own... that would feel amazing all over her body-

Wait, what?

Chapter End Notes

AmbitiousWitch and Doodlegirl1998, know that this is entirely your fault >:-D.
Making new friends

Chapter Summary

As what's left of Team Cap tries to get back in business, Wanda struggles with her newfound realization, Clint is convicted and Friday has an idea.

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter was a bit difficult because I hadn't really planned ahead a few things and I had to improvise. I hope you enjoy it anyway :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No. No, it couldn't be!

Wanda raked her hands through her hair, pacing nervously in her cell.

She couldn't be falling for Tony! Not now! Not after everything that had happened! It was ridiculous to just think about it!

It was wrong, on so many levels! For starters, what about Vision? There was definitely something between them. She had felt it. She couldn't have been wrong.

But now he hates me...

That had really hurt. It was possibly the thing that had hurt Wanda the most, learning what Vision thought of her now.

She had lost her chance with him. She felt that too. Even if she was able to earn Tony's forgiveness, Vision's wasn't bound to follow. And even if it did, it still wouldn't mean they could rekindle.

Vision was lost to her, and she had to accept it. It was difficult, but she had to.

But that still didn't make it right to fall for Tony Stark, of all people! What was she thinking?

The answer was simple: she wasn't thinking.

Love was not a rational feeling. It was possibly the most irrational feeling of them all. So was it really her fault if she was falling for Tony?

She shook her head, trying to avoid that train of thought. No, she couldn't go down that road. She was trying to do right by Tony. And Tony was happy with the life he had now. A good life.

He had a family. A girlfriend and a daughter. His relationship with Pepper Potts hadn't been the smoothest romance in the world, but now they had ironed out all their issues. They were happy together.
And what about Friday? She was their daughter! And Wanda should know better than to mess up someone's parents. Look what she'd done when she lost hers! Friday already didn't like her in the first place, and she would terminate her with a smile on her face if she ever found out Wanda was even thinking that!

Besides... it just wasn't right. Two weeks ago, she wanted to gut Tony. She now knew that it was misplaced hatred, but how was it even possible to do such a one-eighty? How was it possible that now...

*God, what is wrong with me!*

What would Pietro think? What would her parents think? Tony Stark was-

*Tony Stark never had anything to do with what happened to my family. Nothing!*

She winced at the harsh reminder from her traitorous conscience. But it was still wrong. What she was feeling... it was wrong. *Wrong!*

Friday's words caught up to her once again: *revolting, messed up freak.*

But... was it really her fault this time? Should she really try to squash what she was feeling? If love was irrational, it wasn't her fault. Should she really apologize for it? Was it even right to ask that of her?

Why did this have to happen to her? Why now? Why was her life like this?

*...God, what am I going to do?*

***

"Oh, yes! Now we're talking!"

Scott looked like a child in front of a basket full of toys, as he followed the rest of his team into Edwards and Sutherland's base, wandering around with his eyes and staring at the state of the art equipment stored in the hangar-like structure. Among other things, there were also a Quinjet just like the one Clint had commandeered for them when they'd gotten back in the States and not one, but two Black Hawk helicopters.

Steve shared his excitement. Now they had transportation again, and from the looks of things, these guys were also organized well enough to have decent intelligence too.

"So you actually brought them here," a new voice spoke. Steve looked away from the aircrafts at two new people who had made their entrance in the hangar. The nondescript man who had just spoken was looking at Edwards and Sutherland in a somewhat disapproving manner. Behind him, a woman with salt and pepper hair tied in a ponytail was looking at Steve and his team with the same disapproving gaze.

Edwards sighed, looking back at Steve: "These are our colleagues: Oliver Caldwell and Bridget Leary," he said, before turning to his friends: "You... well, you know their names," he shrugged, pointing behind him at Steve's team.

Just like Edwards and Sutherland, Caldwell and Leary looked like two average, boring office clerks. No one, meeting them on the street, would look their way twice. Steve supposed it was a good thing, when you're living a life undercover.
Bucky was nervous as Leary and Caldwell gave the ragtag group a cursory glance. Maybe he had just imagined it, but he thought Caldwell had actually stared at him a moment longer than anyone else...

Steve's voice brought him out of his paranoia: "Mr. Edwards and Mr. Sutherland said you are willing to help us," he said.

Leary scoffed: "Not like we have much of a choice now that you're here, do we?" she gritted out.

There was contempt in her voice. Steve had smelled the challenge, and as usual, he wasn't going to back down: "Ma'am, if you have a problem, I'll be happy to-

"You ruined our lives, Rogers. And in case you don't know, we're the lucky ones. Others were killed or had their families targeted because you pulled an Assange on their asses."

Steve winced: "I'm sorry about that. But we had no choice, it was the only way to expose Hydra..."

Caldwell looked at him dispassionately: "Yeah, yeah. The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants, sure. Problem is, Former Captain, when Thomas Jefferson said that he didn't get to choose which patriots had to give their blood. And Jefferson's patriots knew exactly what they had signed up for. You? You just gave a nice speech about the price of freedom, and then fucked everyone over!"

Steve was getting frustrated: "Look, I really don't think that's fair. You don't know all the details. Hydra was literally seconds away from getting the means to rule over the entire world! I am sorry, I am truly sorry for those who didn't make it, but we were on the brink of a war, do you understand that? It was just impossible to-"

"Stop, Rogers. Just cut it out," Leary interrupted, "We're gonna work with you. Doesn't mean we have to like you. Not everyone buys into your 'God's righteous man' vibe, especially after you ended their life as they knew it! We're not friends, just situational allies. Either deal with it, or fuck off."

Steve looked ready for a nasty retort, but Hank grabbed his arm. Steve decided to let it go and nodded to him, turning back to Leary: "We won't let you down," he promised. Bucky almost found himself waiting for Steve to add the word 'again' to his reply.

Instead, it was Hank who spoke next: "You've got some nice hardware here, guys. But we're gonna need intelligence as well. And start planning how to take down Stark and his team-"

Sutherland interrupted him: "What? Take down Stark? Take down the Avengers? Are you drunk or something?"

All of Hank's ex colleagues were looking at him as if he had grown another head. Before Hank could reply, Edwards spoke next: "So far we've only managed to carry on by keeping a low profile. We only gathered information and sold them to the highest bidder, and we've had to learn to be extremely cautious. Now you want us to go back to being a full on paramilitary squad. Fine, we will. But we'll still keep the low profile. We are not sponsoring your personal vendetta against the Starks, Hank."

The vein on Hank's forehead was starting to bulge, but Leary backed her colleagues up: "They're right. We're not pitting ourselves against Iron Man, the Avengers or the United Nations. In fact, we're gonna do quite the opposite of that: if a mission comes up for your team, the first thing we're gonna do is try to find out if the Avengers are on it too. Hack the local police forces, news stations and social media, and so on. Because if the Avengers are there, for us it's a no go."
"But we can't work like that! If we have to check for the Avengers every time something comes up, we'll never be able to truly make a difference! It will take ages to clear our names!" Scott protested.

"Maybe. But if we don't do that and you get your asses kicked by the Avengers and thrown in jail, it's gonna take even longer than that, don't you think?" Edwards rebuffed him, looking him down.

Hank was fuming, but he didn't reply. Even he could see that his ex-colleagues were talking sense. They had to clear their names, but they couldn't do it overnight. They had to start small and work their way up. Given time, the world would understand how rotten Stark was, and that they had chased the real heroes into hiding.

He would have his chance to discredit Stark. But he had to wait.

Steve was not very happy with this new course of action. He had fought the Accords in fear of being too caught in paperwork and dirty politics to be able to truly help the people, and now he had to waste time and resources at every mission to make sure Tony wouldn't get in the way of his work.

However, if he was honest with himself, he really wasn't looking forward to a third round against Iron Man. If these guys could really hack the local law enforcement and media to gather info about whether the Avengers were gonna be there or not, he was really glad for the chance to avoid the confrontation.

_We'll be able to know when and where Tony and the Avengers are deployed and steer clear of them... Good. one less thing to worry about._

As Steve and Hank were going over other details with Leary, Edwards and Sutherland, Bucky caught Caldwell again staring at him.

He looked pretty angry. Maybe Bucky had killed some of his friends at the Triskelion when SHIELD had fallen? Maybe even injured Caldwell himself? He didn't know. But he could ask:

"Something wrong?" he questioned.

Caldwell scoffed: "A lot of things, actually."

Bucky didn't have time to reply before Caldwell joined the conversation his colleagues were having with Steve.

***

Laura was snuggled on a couch and hugging a pillow with both arms, looking dispassionately at the television. She seemed absent, as if she wasn't even paying attention to what was being broadcasted.

Instead, she was probably paying more attention than she should have if she wanted to preserve her health.

On TV was her now ex-husband, scowling like a baddie from an action movie after being arrested. _Fitting,_ she thought.

Happy found her glaring daggers at the TV. As he sat down at her side, Barton was shown being dragged away by two armed men with a black uniform.

"What are you looking at?!" he barked at the various cameras recording him, "I hope you're happy, you ungrateful bastards! The Avengers saved all of you, countless times! Nice way of saying thank you-"
Barton yapped a bit more, often having his voice beeped and his mouth blurred to censor the various obscenities he was spewing, until he was finally manhandled inside a ginormous armored truck that would have made a Humvee wet itself in fear.

After that rather pitiful show, the shot changed to that of the WHiH Newsfront studio. Happy immediately recognized the blonde girl on the left as Christine Everhart without even looking at her name on the bottom left of the screen. The other host, whose name was written on the right side, was called Will Adams.

"And so, this chapter of the Avengers Civil War finally comes to an end," Everhart spoke, looking all professional, "Former Avenger and SHIELD agent Clinton Francis Barton, codename Hawkeye, has been sentenced to serve twenty-two years at the Raft prison facility, without the possibility of early parole. Will," she called, turning to face her co-host, "you expressed many doubts about the Sokovia Accords when they were first proposed. Back then, your opinion aligned with that of the so called 'Team Cap'. What are your thoughts on Barton's sentence?"

The camera zoomed in on the other anchorman. Adams shook his head and sighed: "Well, Christine, I really don't know what to say. You're right, I had many reservations about the Sokovia Accords at first. I thought they would render the Avengers ineffective. Yet the Avengers - the real Avengers, those who signed the Accords - have already proven me wrong by saving Barton's family and then by capturing Barton himself, along with the Scarlet Witch..."

"So, have you changed your mind?" asked Christine.

"Part of me still wants to think that 'Team Cap', as they are now called, is the one in the right," Adams answered, "I mean... It's Cap! First ever superhero, World War Two veteran, fought Hydra, fought aliens, saved the world... So yes, emotionally I would love to believe that he's right, and that they made Barton's sentence an example, and so on. But if I chose to believe that, then I would have to believe that the whole system is corrupt. That the United Nations, along with the governments of the one hundred and twenty-six nations that as of today have signed the Sokovia Accords, are just useless if not flat out evil. And, rationally, I know that's simply impossible. Then we also have to consider how Team Cap opposes the Accords: the events of Bucharest and Leipzig simply shouldn't have happened. Not to mention, the news of Barton and Maximoff's capture was delivered by Hope Van Dyne in a press statement that honest to God gave me the chills: she said Team Cap basically tried to kill her, that Barton took a policeman hostage-"

Happy switched the TV off: "You shouldn't watch that. You've already been through enough of this shit," he said.

"He's right though," Laura replied, "Clint took a man hostage. He threatened to kill an innocent man. A police officer."

"You alright?" Happy asked.

Laura sighed: "Yes. Yeah, I'm alright... It's actually nice, knowing he's finally going to jail for good. It feels like I can move on, at last. It's just... it's sort of disconcerting to see for the first time after all these years what kind of man he really is, you know? Seeing his true colors only now..."

"Maybe he thought he was just following Rogers' orders and that was good enough for him," Happy answered diplomatically.

Laura scoffed: "Yeah, well, I'm done giving him the benefit of the doubt. During his testimony he started laying into Nat, said he should have just, and I quote: 'taken her out like any other target', which of course prompted the prosecutor to ask how many 'targets' he's taken out in the past. They
had him squirming in his seat in less than a minute, the moron. Then he had the nerve to blame Tony for throwing him in the Raft without a lawyer or a fair trial. They asked him if he knew what preventive detention is, and you know what he said? 'Whatever'. That's it, just 'whatever'. Makes me wonder what the hell I was thinking when I fell for him... It really makes no sense to me now."

"And it probably never will. You loved him, and maybe he was a different man back then, or maybe you just loved him too much to see him for what he truly was, it doesn't matter. And it's all the more reason not to watch that shit," Happy smiled, "You've given him enough already. Now it's time to stop thinking about him and start putting yourself first, don't you think?"

Laura looked at him as if she was seeing him for the first time.

This man was deceiving. Underneath his goofy exterior was an incredibly profound person.

She just gave him a smile to make him understand he got his point across.

"How are the kids?" Happy asked then.

Laura shrugged: "Coping. Nate has the luck of not even knowing what's going on, and Lila's just trying to avoid even thinking about this whole mess. Clint was never there much to begin with, and somehow that helps her, I guess. Coop, though... he's angry. His father was his hero. He was all over the place when he found out Clint was an Avenger. Now, the bastard has literally broken his heart..."

She was scowling now. Again glaring at the TV, even though it was now turned off.

Happy narrowed his eyes for a moment, deep in thought: "You know," he finally said, "a few years ago Tony met this kid from Tennessee, his name's Harley Keener. He's about Cooper's age, and... well, he's pretty much in the exact same situation. His father left one day and never came back, the kid's mother raised him and his little sister alone ever since..."

Laura perked up: "Really?"

"Yeah," Happy answered, a bit absently.

"Why are you telling me this?" Laura wanted to know.

"Well, I only met him once in a video call, but he seems like a nice kid. Besides, I trust Tony's judgement. What I'm saying is... would you like to go on vacation in Rose Hill, Tennessee? I can ask Tony to-"

Laura encircled Happy in a bear hug, overwhelmed: "Thank you, Happy. You're almost too good to be real," she whispered, her voice slightly broken.

He smiled: "Don't mention it. I like to help."

Laura smiled: "Are you sure I can take a vacation right now? I mean, I've only just been hired."

"Eh, Tony and Pepper will get it," Happy replied, waving his hand dismissively, "Besides, technically I'm the head of security and that's where you work, so I'm your immediate superior..."

"Well, in that case thank you again," Laura smiled again, "But you're coming too, right? On vacation with me, I mean."

"Well, if you want me to, I have a couple of weeks of unused vacation time..."

"Yes. I want you to, Boss"
"Then it's a deal. But don't call me Boss, we're on vacation."

They both laughed as they got up from the couch and left the room.

***

Hope was absolutely spent. She wondered how Tony made it look so easy, running R&D at Stark Industries, being Iron Man and liaising with the Accords Committee. It was so difficult for her, trying to contain the damage her father had caused while also working as an Avenger.

Yet that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that she was hunting down her own father.

After her press conference, Tony had said she could take some time off if she felt she needed it, but she had refused. Partly because she wanted to be there if they found Hank, but mostly because, after having gone behind his back, she had felt the need to prove herself to Stark.

And to shut Rhodes up, of course.

There were moments, though, when she felt it was all too much. Like now, for example. She was sitting in her room, staring blankly ahead and struggling to find a reason to ever get up again.

"Do you require anything, Miss Van Dyne?"

Friday's voice coming through the speakers made her jump. She often forgot the girl had a hive mind: "I'm fine, Friday. Why do you ask?"

"Your behavioural patterns indicate strong distress. I wanted to make sure you were alright. Prior to the Civil War and in the first months after it, Boss used to be in distress a lot, and his distress often led him to destructive behaviours.... It wasn't pleasant." Friday answered.

Hope was slightly stunned, but she appreciated the concern: "I'm fine, Friday. Just a bit stressed by the recent events," she assured.

"Perhaps you need a distraction," Friday mused, "Can I come in?"

Before Hope could answer, someone knocked at her door. When she went to open it, Friday was there, smiling: "Was that weird?" she asked.

Hope shook her head slightly in denial, and also to get rid of the mild confusion at Friday's ubiquity: "No. Well, maybe a bit, but I'll get used to it. What's up, Friday?"

"Well, I've had an idea," the young redhead started, "I went over the telemetry from Boss' suit during the skirmish in San Francisco and I saw that he carried you to Barton's quinjet inside his shoulder launcher...", she told her, indicating vaguely at her own shoulder.

"He did," Hope confirmed, "We improvised a bit, but it worked. What about it?" she asked, retreating inside the room and motioning to Friday to follow her.

"You see, you and I are now part of a very exclusive club who have been inside an Iron Man armour," Friday said, sitting on a chair across from Hope, "and as you said, you were successful in apprehending Barton and Maximoff."

Hope narrowed her eyes, smirking slightly: "I think I know what you're trying to say, but go on..." Friday matched her smirk: "That was quite an impressive move from you and Boss. Not too complex, but it showed good teamwork and it was clearly very effective. So, I was just wondering,
since I'm currently working on my second armour... maybe you and I could refine that move a little? Take off some of the improvisation and play a bit more on the element of surprise? Only if you're interested, of course..."

Hope raised an eyebrow, her smirk growing slightly: "Well, you might have a point. Maybe I do need a distraction."

They left the room, smiling at each other and heading for the armory.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is gonna be another "dream" chapter like Chapter 21, just so you know. Then things will get serious again...
Tony's repulsor had knocked Steve against the wall of the bunker, leaving Bucky to fend for himself in the fight against Iron Man's madness.

Steve was scared. His worst fear was materializing before his very eyes.

He knew Tony was not going to be reasonable. He knew he was going to react in such an immature way and put the blame on the wrong person. He knew it, dammit! That's why he'd never told Tony! He wouldn't have been able to handle it!

He got to his hands and knees, trying to get up, trying to get back in the fray and help Bucky. But maybe, just maybe, Bucky wouldn't need it.

He had cornered Tony against the wall. Tony was trying to fight him off, but Bucky's shiny metal hand was already on the suit's reactor.

*Come on, Bucky, you can do this!*

It could have ended there. Bucky would have disabled the suit and Tony would have been incapacitated without being harmed. But of course, Tony was too stubborn to back down when he was losing.

In the exact moment Tony shot Bucky's arm into smithereens, Steve saw red.

Gone was the man that the world knew, that Captain America's stories depicted. Only the darkest part of Steve Rogers was left. The part who would not fight for the little guy, but who would put his own needs, his *instincts*, first.

So Steve got up from the ground and attacked. For him, and for Bucky.

*He hurt Bucky! He's gonna pay!*

For a moment, Steve had feared the worst. Tony had gotten the upper hand. But, even as beaten up as he was, Bucky always had his back.

He provided enough of a distraction for Steve to sneak attack Tony from behind. And he sure as hell
wasn't gonna delve in fairplay-related second thoughts when Tony had just been callous and *cruel* enough to sever Bucky's arm *again*.

He bodily threw Tony against the floor and started punching his face in, but that goddamn armor was too resilient.

Never mind. He would have liked the satisfaction of punching the mask off Tony's face with his bare hands, but he was gonna take what he could get. So he just took the shield and, after only a couple of well aimed strikes, the helmet gave.

Steve ripped it off, and readied himself for the final blow.

He relished the fear in Tony's eyes, but fear was not the only thing he saw.

There was rage. Furious, untamed rage. And betrayal.

Tony felt betrayed. Maybe that was what stopped Steve from killing him.

Perhaps, in the back of his mind, Steve felt the need to prove to Tony that he was better than him. That he would spare him even though he could have killed him.

He resettled, and brought his shield down on the arc reactor instead of Tony's throat. He just killed the suit instead of killing Tony.

Maybe Tony was going to learn something from this. In the end, Tony was a good man. He was just incapable of handling his emotions.

Tony's taunts grated on him harshly as he pulled Bucky to his feet, but Steve was not going to bother with him anymore.

He didn't care about the shield. He finally had Bucky back and Tony could do no more harm. Nothing else mattered.

He let the shield drop. It was going to be fine.

But they had only taken a few steps when the impossible happened.

Steve heard the noises more than actually seeing it happen: a repulsor charged up with its typical whine, and then a blast of pure light shot right out of Bucky's chest.

Bucky's entire body seized and he made a strangled, gurgling noise.

Both terrified, the two super soldiers looked at each other.

Blood started spilling out of Bucky's mouth as his body slumped against Steve's, before he fell to the ground, an enormous, gaping hole going all the way through his chest where his heart should be.

Steve screamed. The pain he felt in that moment was matched only by his rage. He was gonna *murder* Stark. But when he turned towards Iron Man to do just that, he stopped dead in his track.

In front of him, in the helmetless suit with the crushed reactor and chest plate and with his face beaten, bloody and contorted by murderous fury, was not Tony.

It was Howard.

"You..." he seethed, with so much venom in his voice that Steve took a step back in fear.
"You dared to use that shield to hurt my son!" Howard growled.

Steve blabbed something incoherent, trying to come up with the appropriate words to justify himself, to make Howard understand, but he didn't get the chance. Howard backhanded him so hard that Steve lost balance and fell to the ground.

"Do you like it, Steve!?" Howard inquired.

Steve didn't even try to get up. He just turned around so he could face his enraged friend: "Howard-

"Do you like it!?" Howard repeated, slamming his armored boot on Steve's face, breaking his nose, "Do you like being beaten to near death by someone you considered a friend!?" he asked, viciously kicking Steve in the chest.

Steve couldn't even bring his arms up to try and protect himself: "Howard, please-" he pleaded desperately, crying pathetically. But his old friend was having none of it.

"Answer, Steve!" Howard yelled, slamming his foot down on Steve's chest hard enough to punch all the air out of the supersoldier: "Do you enjoy it? Your bones cracking..." he said, stomping down on Steve again, "...your flesh bruising..." he continued, again kicking the soldier, "...your ribs breaking, puncuring your lungs, drowning you in your own blood!"

He continued kicking Steve with abandon. One after the other, several of Steve's ribs did indeed break under Howard's hits, but the supersoldier couldn't do anything other than wail uselessly and curl into a ball in utter fear, cowardly trying to inspire mercy by showing submission.

Howard finally stopped kicking him, and kneeled next to him: "But that isn't even the best part, is it, Steve?" he seethed, grabbing Steve's collar and hoisting him up. He then proceeded to viciously punch Steve so hard that the back of his head hit the concrete floor again.

"No, the best part is the betrayal! Seeing that the man who you're fighting is someone you thought was your friend!" Howard yelled, again punching Steve in the face.

Steve couldn't fight back. He just couldn't. He closed his eyes and cried, waiting for Howard to deliver the final blow. But Howard never did.

"Look at you. You have such a high opinion of yourself. You think you're so much better than my son, don't you? Instead you're just a pathetic, small, worthless human being, Rogers. And most importantly, you are irrelevant."

Steve gathered the courage to look Howard in the eyes, too confused to ask any question.

Tony's father continued: "You clung so desperately to the past that you could never be bothered to find your place in the present. You kissed Peggy's niece only so you could have a part of your 'best girl' back. You resented Tony for being his own person and not my exact image. And you fought the entire world and even killed innocent people to protect a man who is your precious Bucky only in your memories..."

Saying this, Howard grabbed Steve by the hair and forced him to watch over where Bucky's dead body was lying a few feet away.

"Look at him," Howard ordered, "that man is dead! James Barnes is dead! Bucky is dead, and he will never come back! He has been the Winter Soldier for more than seventy years by now! He will never, ever, go back to being Bucky from Brooklyn, Steve. But you clung to him so desperately, that you sacrificed everyone else for him..."
Steve's eyes bulged at Howard's words. Tony's father loosened the grip on his hair and let him go, standing up and looking down at him.

"You have made your choice, Steve. This is where that road ends. You're injured too badly; you're not gonna be able to get out of this bunker on your own."

Steve was still crying, but now he was also trembling, both in fear and because of the cold Siberian air that was starting to seep into the room. Howard leaned down slightly:

"Tony was rescued in the end, because he has friends. Real friends. You? You don't have real friends, you only have ass-kissers. And anyway, all of them are in jail now, because of you. The others? You never considered them friends. The irony, Tony was probably the only one who actually thought of you as a friend, but you burned that bridge to the ground..."

Steve let out a strained noise, trying to lift a hand towards Howard, in denial of what he had just said, but also in a plea of help. But Howard had turned his back on him and was already walking away: "There's no one left. Only you and the ice, all over again. But this time the ice won't save you, Steve."

Howard had reached the entrance of the bunker when he stopped and turned around one last time: "It will end you."

Steve was startled awake by Sam shaking him. He jolted up in a sitting position, breathing heavily.

"You okay, man? It sounded like a pretty bad nightmare..." asked Sam. Steve only nodded and took a deep breath, letting himself fall back on the mattress. Sam just gave him another, slightly worried look before pursing his lips and returning to his bunk.

Steve watched him go: *It's not true what Howard said, he thought, I do have real friends that have my back. I don't need Tony! I don't need his forgiveness!*

*I don't!*

***

Clint was running up the stairs, a terrible feeling gnawing at his stomach, so much so that he thought he might be sick and vomit right then and there.

Every second seemed to stretch into eternity. He tried running even faster, desperate to make it in time. When he got to the top of the stairs, he was worried it was already too late.

He sprinted to his bedroom and yanked the door open. His heart skipped a beat as his fear was confirmed.

Stark was there, in his bed, lying right next to Laura. Both were looking at him as if they were expecting him to walk in on them, and didn't care in the least.

"Well well. Look who showed up," Laura sneered with contempt.

Clint's brain was overloading. There were too many emotions at once: rage, desperation, confusion, sadness, embarrassment... he was simply too overwhelmed to even move a finger.

He only managed to register that, while they were lying in bed side by side with a blanket up to their waists, they didn't seem to have done anything more... yet: Laura was still wearing a bra and Stark a tank top. Oddly - or maybe not - he didn't feel relieved in the slightest. It was almost as if they were
"No, birdbrain, we weren't waiting for you," Stark scoffed condescendingly, shaking his head.

That reeled Clint up even more: *What- can he read my mind too!? I know he's somehow enhanced now, but-

"We were waiting for someone else..." continued Tony.

Clint didn't understand a single thing of what was going on: *Someone else? Who-

"Are you going to stand there like an idiot for much longer?"

The voice coming from behind him made him jump. As he turned around, the hair on the back of his neck had shot up.

Natasha was there. On her face was an irritated frown that he knew usually meant 'Black Widow is pissed, and someone is about to get hurt'.

"So? You gonna get out of my way or what? You're standing right in the doorway! I don't want Tony and Laura to start without me!" she exclaimed, her frown rapidly turning into a full-on angry face. That was when he took a better look at her... and he immediately wished he hadn't.

She was wearing black and red lingerie underwear, and *nothing else*. It didn't take a genius to understand what she was doing dressed like that, in *his* bedroom, with Laura and Tony.

He was still too out of it to take action, but Natasha took matters into her own hands. She rolled her eyes at him, and then swiftly punched him straight in the throat.

He dropped like a sack of potatoes. Natasha stepped over him and walked towards the bed: "Good. Now that this asshole is dealt with, we can finally have some fun..." she said in a husky voice, crawling onto the bed and lying down between Laura and Tony.

He could hear giggles, moans and heavy breaths from the bed as he convulsed on the floor. As he finally got up on all fours and gazed upon the three, the sight made him want to cry, and scream, and kill. But he was too devastated to do any of those things.

Natasha was now kissing Tony, Laura lightly biting her shoulder. Eventually, the redhead was the first to notice him: "Oh, don't look at me like I've just broken your poor little heart! After all, I'm just taking your advice: you asked me if I convinced Tony to lower my sentence in exchange for some... special services, didn't you? Pretty sure it was meant as an insult, but it's actually not a bad idea. So... Thank you, Clint."

Laura laughed out loud at this: "Yes, thank you, Clint. Bringing Nat in to play with us really spiced things up for me and Tony," she said before narrowing her eyes: "I bet you mulled a lot over the idea of involving her while you and I were still together, didn't you?"

"Hah, poor Barton... I convinced them both pretty easily, you know?" laughed Stark, as the first tears started to fall from Clint's eyes, "Then again, I've always been persuasive with women," he added while taking Natasha's bra off, while she turned around to kiss Laura.

All three of them laughed as Natasha's bra was thrown on Clint's face.

He woke up abruptly and found himself in his new cell, alone. His heart was beating a mile a minute, and it took him a moment to remember that he was in the Raft. That this was his new bed, and that it
was gonna be his bed for the next twenty-two years.

"Goddammit," he whispered to himself. It was just a dream, but he felt like crying anyway.

***

Tony was exhasperated.

Seriously, he was doing everything in his power to take care of the team and protect it, and then one day, Rogers up and decides 'You know what, let's ruin Tony's existence by engaging wayward Hydra terrorists in an all-out fight in the middle of a crowded market in Nigeria! Come on, it'll be fun!'

It had been a disaster. Thirty-eight dead, among which eleven Wakandans. Nigeria was out for blood, the Wakandan king, T'Chaka, was understandably blowing a gasket, and now motherfucking Ross was breathing down their necks. He felt like a parent being called by the headmaster because his kids had misbehaved at school.

Everyone was gathering at the conference room. Ross was gonna be there soon, but Wanda was still missing.

For the first time ever, Tony actually felt bad for the Sokovian girl: yes, she had fucked up (again), but really, that was on Rogers for getting her out on the field without proper training. Plus, he wouldn't want to have to deal with Ross even in normal circumstances, and Wanda's situation right now was anything but normal.

But she really couldn't skip this meeting. Lagos had been a glaring example of how far from perfect the Avengers were. And nobody wanted to hear justifications, what they wanted was an admission of guilt and responsibility. Wanda had to be there and at least show good will, after such a monumental tragedy. She had to face this.

He went to her room to talk to her and convince her to come to the meeting, but when he got there, the sight took him aback.

The door was open, and the TV was on. They were talking about Nigeria. Wanda was on her bed, hugging her knees to her chest and watching the TV with tears rolling down her eyes.

Tony was unsure of what to do. He had never seen her like this.

He turned the TV off as she hid her face against her knees: "It's my fault," she sobbed.

Tony pursed his lips as he sat down on the side of the bed. He didn't know what to say.

Wanda continued: "I wanted to do better... to be a hero... and instead I..."

She didn't finish. She shook her head and curled even more on herself, shaking with sobs.

In that moment, Tony really felt pity for her. Him and Wanda had come to some sort of an understanding when Ultron had been dealt with, but he had never actually thought he would ever find himself in a similar situation.

But now, Wanda needed him. She was beating herself over what had happened. She was lost. She was desperate. And she had been left alone.

He knew how devastating it was to feel abandoned. She needed his help.
He put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her against his side.

She nuzzled against him and slowly, her sobs receded. But her thoughts didn't: "It's my fault," she repeated in a small voice.

Tony pulled her even closer and hugged her: "You made a mistake, Wanda. A terrible one. That's undeniable and you can't change it. The only thing you can do is deal with it..."

The girl looked up at him with sad, hopeful eyes: "How?" she asked, "How can I possibly fix this?"

"You can't," Tony interrupted her, "innocent people died, there's no fixing this. But you can make sure it doesn't happen again."

Wanda looked up at him with wide, teary eyes. Tony caressed her cheek: "I built my first ever armor to escape captivity in Afghanistan, but you know why I really became Iron Man?" he asked. She shook her head.

"I became Iron Man to hunt down and destroy all those weapons built by my company that had been sold under the table to terrorists and criminals. I did it because I had made a mistake, one that I couldn't rectify. So all I could do was stop that mistake from having more consequences."

Wanda nodded twice, lowering her gaze, and then hid her face against Tony's chest: "I want to do that too," she said meekly, "I need to... I need more control over my powers, and... more focus on what happens around me in a fight..."

"We'll talk to Steve about that," Tony promised, kissing her forehead and holding her tight, "Dry your tears, Wanda. I don't think any less of you."

She smiled sadly at him: "Thank you, Tony."

Tony twitched slightly, but didn't wake up. In her cell, Wanda collapsed on her bed, utterly exhausted, hoping she hadn't taken it too far this time. She wanted Tony to warm up to her, for sure. But after that?

Part of her wanted more. Another part screamed it was wrong.

She was still trying to figure out what to do about her feelings for Tony when the exhaustion finally took over and she fell asleep.

***

She had lost everything.

She had trusted Steve. She had chosen him over Tony. And now, everyone had abandoned her.

She didn't even know if the authorities knew where she was detained, and if they did, they probably approved.

*It's an involuntary reaction in their amygdala. They can't help but be afraid of you.*

She was as good as dead. Ross was going to experiment on her, turn her into a guinea pig, dissect her and then throw her remains in the trash when he was done. No one was gonna come to save her.

She had screamed and cried agonizingly, until her throat felt like it had been thoroughly scraped with sandpaper. Yet her screams and cries went completely unanswered.
After that, she had become completely apathetic. Catatonic, even. It felt like nothing could ever shake her from her passive state ever again.

She started hearing undefined noises, but didn't pay them any attention. For a moment, she wondered if they were real or if she was just imagining them.

But then, he appeared.

He came to stand in front of her cell, enveloped in his shining red armor. She was almost scared of believing it was real: she wouldn't have handled it if she found this was just another product of her imagination.

But then, his armor opened, and Tony stepped out just as the door of her cell slid up into the ceiling. He took her face in his hands, caressing her cheeks and looking at her with worried eyes, and she realized she wasn't imagining it.

*He's here... He's really here... For me...*

He made quick work of that blasted collar around her neck, and started undoing her straitjacket. Wanda was overwhelmed: it felt like she had just resurfaced after being underwater for too long. She was finally able to breathe again.

"T...Tony..." she stuttered, as he finally started sliding the straitjacket off her shoulders.

She felt tears running down her eyes. But this time, they were tears of joy.

"I'm so sorry, Wanda... I never thought it would end like this..." said Tony finally taking the straitjacket off. As soon as her arms were free, she hugged him and buried her face against his shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Ssshh... It's okay now. Nobody's gonna hurt you again," he whispered, kissing the top of her head, "Let's go home."

He picked her up bridal style and carried her out and away from that disgusting cell. Now they were in her room, at the Compound.

The sun was shining through the windows, bathing the entire room in an ethereal light. Never before had Wanda focused on how calming an environment it was. She was home.

Tony gently deposited her on her bed and made to stand up. Immediately, Wanda grabbed his arm with both hands: "Wait! Don't go! Please..." she pleaded.

Tony immediately sat on the edge of the bed, smiling reassuringly: "I'm not going anywhere, Wanda. I promise," he said, caressing her cheek again.

Wanda felt like her heart was going to explode with happiness. She took Tony's hand in her own, turning slightly and kissing his palm.

Tony looked at her with such intensity that she felt a chill run down her spine, but not a bad one. It was as if he was really seeing her for the first time. He didn't protest when Wanda slowly moved his hand on her right breast.

"Tony..." she whispered.

He repositioned, never breaking eye contact. He laid down on the bed right next to her, his face
moving agonizingly closer to hers.

When they finally kissed, Wanda felt like all her nerve endings had caught fire. She timidly raked one hand through his hair, pulling him closer. Tony went willingly, deepening the kiss.

She had never felt so alive.

When they broke apart for air, Tony was already undoing the buttons of her camisole. He stopped, looking at her as if asking for permission.

She nodded vehemently. *I need you... Please...*

He took his time with the remaining three buttons, as if to tease her. When he finally pried the garment open, he looked at her exposed breasts almost with adoration: "You're so beautiful, Wanda..." he hissed huskily, bending down and taking one of her nipples in his mouth, caressing her other breast with his hand.

Wanda moaned as he continued placing open mouthed kisses all over her body, moving lower and lower. It took him just a gentle tug at the hem of her pajama pants for her to lift herself up so he could pull them down.

"Let me take care of you, Wanda..." he whispered, kissing her navel and moving lower again.

It felt like a dream...

It *was* a dream.

Wanda's eyes opened to the sight of the dull, familiar gray walls of her cell. She looked around and Tony was gone. No, he wasn't just gone - he had never been there.

She looked down at herself: she had kicked the blankets down at the foot of the bed, her pants were halfway down to her knees and she had a hand between her legs.

Chapter End Notes

So, remember when I said Wanda was only influencing Tony's dreams? Well, it's not entirely correct... she's also influencing her own XD.

This is as far as she will go in terms of indulging in her fantasies, however. And it won't happen again... because in three chapters time, her little plan will spectacularly blow up in her face. Next chapter we'll actually start to see how. >:-)
Best laid plans

Chapter Summary

Team Cap screws up again. In the meantime, Wanda's plan starts to have effects on Tony.

Chapter Notes

You know, it was difficult to come up with something for Team Cap to screw up so royally that it would top nearly setting off a new Chernobyl. I think this is worse. Tell me what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve sighed in defeat and braced himself as he walked out of the old Quinjet. A lot of yelling was about to happen.

In fact he wasn't even out of the jet as Liam Edwards stalked up to him and grabbed him by his uniform: "Are you clinically insane!?" he yelled. Inside the Quinjet, Bucky had to fight back the knee-jerk instinct of attacking Edwards when he saw him assault Steve like that. Both Sam and Scott gave him a worried look.

Steve winced: "Look, it was an accident. It wasn't supposed to happen-"

"Oh, no! You did not just tell me that it wasn't supposed to happen!" Edwards roared.

Hank and Sutherland appeared behind him: "Liam, let him go!" Hank demanded.

"Fuck you, Pym!" the incensed ex-SHIELD agent retorted harshly, "It was a mission so simple we could have done it ourselves! Instead, these knuckleheads caused a worldwide disaster!"

"Well, come on, that's a bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?" Scott tried to imput, "It was just a small freighter..."

Edwards looked at him with such disbelief, desolation and disgust that Scott actually took a step back.

"Just a small freighter?" Edwards asked, barely containing himself, "Just a small freighter!? Are you kidding me?" he hissed again.

"Technically he's right," Hank interceded, while Caldwell and Leary joined them silently, with a grave expression on their faces, "the Yasoshima Maru was just thirty-four thousand tons-"

Bridget Leary laughed, almost hysterically: "Oh, great, Hank. If you put it that way I'm sure the authorities will be appeased!" she scoffed, "Your circus freaks have just sunk a ship right in the middle of the fucking Panama Canal, but hey, it's just a thirty-four thousand ton freighter, no biggie! I'm seriously worried about you! Have you been spending too much time around these idiots or is it..."
just old age taking over?"

Hank wasn't gonna take this. He raised his hand and pulled it back to strike the woman across her face, but Sutherland caught his wrist and jerked him away from his colleague, making him lose balance and fall on his rear. Scott stalked forward, ready to defend his mentor, but Edwards let Steve go and came up to Scott, shoving him backwards: "You better sit down, Lang!" he hissed.

Caldwell was the one who stopped the situation from escalating: "Calm down! All of you!" he yelled, getting between Hank and Leary and holding a hand up to each of them.

Steve was quick to back him up: "Agent Caldwell is right. Getting angry won't solve the situation-

"Rogers, please shut your mouth!" Caldwell cut him off, "Just because I told them to calm down it doesn't mean I'm justifying your fuck-up! And kissing my ass won't make me take your side!"

Steve looked at him with confusion: "We are all on the same side here-

It was again Edwards who interrupted him this time: "Yeah, that's what scares me. You fuckers only had to intercept a fucking weapons shipment!"

"We did! And we even managed to avoid casualties," Scott again interjected, "Nobody got hurt, and now those weapons will never reach Venezuela! Hell, we even captured the entire crew and dropped them to the authorities!"

"Yeah, sure. Great job, Lang," Edwards interrupted him again, "You just had to stop a goddamn black market weapon dealer! Normal cops all around the world do that all the time! You 'enhanced individuals' should be able to do it better than normal cops, right!? So how is it that you couldn't do it without nearly blocking the most important maritime route in the world!?!" he yelled, so harshly that this time, Scott nearly burst out crying like a spoiled kid being chastised.

"Listen-" Steve tried, but Edwards wasn't done yet: "Can you even begin to comprehend the magnitude of the mess you caused!?!" he asked.

When Steve just looked at him like a deer caught in headlights, Edwards continued: "Mercifully, the Yasoshima Maru sank in a point where it doesn't block most of the traffic inside the Canal, but the wreck is still too much of a hazard for some of the bigger ships. So the Canal won't be back to full capacity until the ship that you sunk is refloated and towed out of the way. Ships that are too big to sail around the wreckage safely enough will have to be diverted either through the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, or all the way around South America! Do you know how many ships transit the Panama Canal every day, Rogers!? Can you even imagine the losses in fuel and time alone!? Do you really think that capturing a few Yakuzas justifies a similar damage!?"

"I'm curious, are you going to find a way to blame Tony Stark or the Accords for this screw-up too?" Sutherland asked before Steve even had a chance to answer. This time, even Hank didn't reply, although Sam could have sworn he could see the gears turning in his head to find a way to put the blame on Stark's shoulders.

"Ok, this was all a terrible idea," Edwards surmised when nobody answered Sutherland's question, "Hank, grab your friends, pack your things and leave."

Steve's eyes bulged. Edwards was kidding, right?

"Wha... You- you can't just kick us out!" Scott protested.

"Yeah, pretty sure we can," Leary replied, "it's our base, after all."
For a moment, Hank bristled, but then he immediately recovered his cool: "Yeah, it's your base. And now we know where it is" he scoffed.

"Pardon?" Caldwell hissed, smelling trouble.

"We know everything about you guys," Hank smirked, "and you said it yourselves: you have to constantly look over your shoulders. So, are you really sure you want us to go away, now that we know where you are and what you do here?"

A heavy silence followed Hank's threat. Edwards was the first to reply: "Careful, Pym. You're threading on really thin ice here," he seethed, pointing a finger at him.

"You leave me no choice. We are all on the same boat here. If we go down, you go down too," Hank replied smugly.

The four ex-SHIELD agents growled at him, but Hank stood his ground.

Steve tried to diffuse them: "Look, we made a mistake. I understand that in this particular occasion, the collateral damage we caused grossly overmatches the benefit of completing the mission, but we are better than this. We are the Avengers. Accidents happen, but I promise you that the next time, everything will go flawlessly. And if it doesn't... we'll leave you alone."

The four perked up at Steve's statement. Hank too looked at him and shook his head, probably confident that he could blackmail his former colleagues indefinitely.

But Steve didn't see it that way: "We only ask for another chance. If the next mission doesn't go off without a hitch, we'll leave this place and forget it even exists. But for now, we need you. One last chance. It's all we ask for."

None of them believed him. But they all hesitated. It sucked, but Hank was right: they couldn't kick them out. They knew too much.

"One last chance, Rogers," Sutherland finally relented, "Next time you screw up, you will sorely regret it."

"Thank you," Steve replied, smiling gratefully, "we won't let you down."

"You already said that the first time," Edwards muttered while Steve and the team finally exited the Quinjet.

As they moved inside the base, none of them noticed Caldwell suddenly smirking.

***

"Boss, we have a problem," Friday started, entering Tony's office.

Tony was startled: "Hmm?" he just answered, as Friday jolted him out of his thoughts: "I'm sorry, baby girl, what was that?"

"Steve Rogers has done it again," Friday elaborated, "his team has sunk a Japanese cargo ship, the Yasoshima Maru. I've run some checks, the ship belongs to a shell company owned by one Shigeru Morimoto, a prominent figure of the Japanese organized crime."

"The Yakuza?" Tony asked distractedly.

"Yes, Boss. Morimoto was found tied and gagged in front of a police station in Panama City, along
with several of his known associates and the entire crew of the Yasoshima Maru."

At first, Tony only nodded: "So at least Rogers caught the bad guy this time," he said simply.

Friday's brow furrowed: he seemed really distracted today. She was about to ask if he was feeling alright, when suddenly his eyes bulged: "Wait, a police station in Panama City? Hang on, you said they sunk-...oh, please, tell me it's not what I'm thinking..."

Friday nodded gravely: "The Yasoshima Maru was sunk at the Pacific entrance of the Panama Canal."

Tony covered his face with his hands and shook his head: "You've gotta be shitting me," he sighed. When he didn't say anything more, Friday continued: "The Panamanian authorities have already written a preliminary report. Apparently, the Yasoshima Maru was sunk close to the Bridge of the Americas, in sight of Balboa Reach. It's the first stretch of the Canal on the Pacific side, and luckily it's a spot in which the Canal itself is still wide enough that most ship can sail past the wreckage with reasonable safety. At a first, approximate estimation, the navigational hazard is deemed too high for ships longer than 950 feet and with a GRT of about 210 thousand tons or heavier."

"Great," Tony muttered to himself, dragging his hands down his face, "Alright, let's see how angry the Committee will get this time. Gather the team in the conference room. Just, uh... Give me fifteen minutes."

Friday's brow furrowed again: "Boss?"

"There's, um..." Tony started, before shaking his head dismissively: "There's something I gotta do first."

***

When Wanda saw him enter the room, she found herself completely out of breath.

She definitely wasn't ready. Ever since she had been thrown in this cell, the only person she had interacted with was Friday. She was expecting it to be her this time as well. She definitely wasn't expecting him.

"M-Mr. Stark," she acknowledged awkwardly, standing up from her cot but still looking down in a show of politeness, respect, maybe even submission.

Her plan had worked. This was her chance, and she was going to make it count.

"Hello, Wanda," he greeted casually. God, his voice was so deep and warm...

Wanda gathered herself: "I'd tell you to sit and make yourself comfortable, but... I can only offer you a place on my mat." she said, finally looking up at him and smiling apologetically. She took in his appearance as if it was the first time she saw him. In a way, it was: this was the first time she looked at him in person under a completely different light.

The last time she had seen his face had been in Leipzig, while the police was arresting her and he was talking with some paramedics who were wheeling away a stretcher with an unconscious James Rhodes on it. It had been a fleeting instant, him far away and not even looking in her direction, but she remembered perfectly the worry and anger etched on his face in that moment.

After that, she had only ever met him once, in San Francisco, that fateful night when she and Clint
were captured. She remembered that occasion just as clearly: Tony had never opened his helmet. She had never seen his face again. All she remembered was the armor: it was a dark blue, almost black. She had later found out in Friday's memories how that armor, 'Sweet Revenge', Tony called it, resembled Steve's SHIELD uniform. The uniform Steve had worn while unwittingly working for Hydra. Mocking, distracting and playing on Steve's guilt all at the same time. Tony truly was a genius. She was sure Steve would never have a chance the next time.

And now, all of a sudden, there he was, in her cell, wearing jeans, a T-shirt and a black leather jacket.

He looked way more relaxed. Younger, even. It was probably thanks to Extremis. She had seen that too, in Friday's memories. The thought of Steve hurting him so badly that he had had to resort to an experimental super serum to survive made her bristle with anger. She had really chosen the wrong side.

Tony moved silently to her cot at the same time she did, and they sat side by side. *If he sits with me it means he isn't scared, otherwise he would stay by the door... Thank God, I can't stand him being scared of me...*

He looked down, seemingly gathering his thoughts, before looking back at her: "So, we have found your safe house in Boston, but by the time we got there, Steve and the others were long gone. Now they've caused a disaster in Panama. We need to find them, and fast. Wanda, if you have any idea where they could be, I need to know. I know you hate me and you think I'm the bad guy in all this, but-

Wanda shook her head: "No! I- I don't hate you, Mr. Stark! I was wrong about you, I realize that now!" she assured, taking his hands.

Tony didn't try to withdraw, and that was all the encouragement Wanda needed to act.

She concentrated as much as she could without giving herself away. She could feel some of her power forcing past the suppressor. It was such a meager amount that Tony would never notice, and it probably wouldn't have had any effect if she weren't actually making physical contact by holding his hands. Even so, it was not gonna make much of a difference.

But she had to try. She had to make him understand. She had to convince him.

She lowered her head: "I'm sorry, Mr. Stark. It is true that, for a long time, I thought you were bad. But I've opened my eyes now. And... I never thought my opinion on somebody could change so radically. You... you're a great person, Mr. Stark. And you can believe me, if I knew anything about where Steve is, I'd tell you. I'd be happy to tell you. What he did to you... how he lied to you, about something so important... I despise him for that. I can imagine very well how you must have felt in Siberia..." she said with a slightly broken voice, her eyes becoming glassy with unshed tears.

Tony looked at her and felt a whirlwind of emotions. He felt sorry for her, and he also felt guilty. If only he had sat down with her and talked to her about why she needed to stay at the Compound before Leipzig happened...

He also felt like he had never really tried to understand Wanda before. He had written her off as opportunistic, childish, dangerous and generally bad, but maybe... maybe she really was trying to atone for her past. He, better than anyone, should know that.

Maybe it wasn't right. Maybe she didn't deserve all this. Of course, she had done terrible things, but she maybe she was telling the truth, about being sorry and having opened her eyes...
"Alright. I believe you, Wanda," he assured her.

Wanda smiled sincerely. After all, she had only told him the hard and fast truth.

Tony sighed. Maybe it was time to clear the air between them: "Wanda, I'm sorry it came to this," he sighed, gesturing to the cell, "but there was no other choice, you know that, right?"

Again, Wanda nodded meekly: "I understand, Mr. Stark. I... I just... I felt like being an Avenger was my chance to be better..."

Her eyes got glassy again. She let go of one of Tony's hands to wipe out her tears.

She was miserable, and Tony hated it. He looked at her more closely, and... he found himself thinking he didn't want to see her cry. She was so beautiful when she was smiling...

He drew her into a hug. She calmed down quickly and he felt the need to reassure her: "I don't know what's going to happen now. You're not getting off with a slap on your wrists, what you've done is pretty impossible to defend. Whatever your reasons may be, they are not good enough reasons to smash an airport and a nuclear powerplant. But I'll try to pledge your case, ok? I can't get you out of this cell, but I can try to make it more comfortable for you... Maybe we can replace that collar with a bracelet or something like that, and get you in a bigger cell, maybe with a window..."

"Thank you, Mr. Stark... I don't deserve your kindness," she said lowering her head, just as a traitorous voice in the back of her mind confirmed: you really don't.

Tony didn't answer. He just looked at her. They were still holding hands.

"Mr. Stark..." Wanda whispered, inching closer to his face, "Tony..."

The moment was abruptly broken by the door of the cell swinging open. Friday stood there with a solemn expression. Wanda let go of Tony's hands and withdrew, just as Tony was jolted back to his senses: "Are you waiting for me?" he asked his daughter.

"Yes, Boss. We are ready when you are." she answered professionally. Maybe too professionally.

"Good. Let's go to work," Tony stated, getting up, "See you, Wanda." he greeted simply. When Wanda just nodded in acknowledgement, Tony smiled at her and he left the room.

Friday didn't.

She narrowed her eyes at Wanda and took two steps closer: "What's going on?" she asked generically.

"I don't take your meaning," Wanda replied, trying to appear less challenging as possible.

Friday wasn't gonna fall for it: "Your nostrils flared," she said, crossing her arms.

"What?"

"Your nostrils flared," she repeated, "It's an involuntary reaction when someone is lying or hiding something."

Wanda stumbled a bit: "I didn't ask Mr. Stark to come here," she assured.

"Right," Friday simply answered. You wanna play, witch? Alright, let's play.
"Did you have fun last night?" Friday asked then, smirking.

Wanda's eyes bulged: "You- you were watching me?" she shrieked. Had Friday figured her out?

"Of course I was," Friday answered casually, "I told you I'm constantly on witch-watch duty. Didn't know it would become so gross..."

That got Wanda angry: "Well, if it bothers you so much all you have to do is turn off the feed! A real woman has needs, not that you would know that!"

Friday didn't take her up on the offence: "Actually I can't turn off the feed. The Committee wants AV surveillance on you 24/7. It's to make sure you're not mistreated. And just so you know, they review all of the footage we send them. I was going to ask you to refrain from doing that again, but if you don't have any qualms with them seeing you enjoy yourself at night, who am I to judge?"

Wanda's eyes bulged again. Friday got even closer: "I don't know your intentions, Witchy, but take my advice: if you're up to something, you better stop now." she seethed, turning and leaving the room.

Even in the midst of the embarrassment that Friday's revelation had caused her, Wanda released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

***

The Panamanian representative of the Sokovia Accords Central Committee was a middle aged man called Mariano Ferrer. And he was so pissed it was almost like he was spitting fire from his mouth.

"How is it even possible!?! Those four *hijos de puta* caused more damage to my country than World War Three would have done!" he shouted, slamming his fist down on his desk. Both the Avengers and every other representative of the Committee connected in video conference with them flinched.

"Delegate Ferrer, I'm sure we can work out the fastest way to remove the wreckage," Isaiah Bradley, the new American representative, said placatingly.

"Yeah, and in the meantime, the Panama Canal will be operating at half capacity! Your countries can all handle it, but Panama? This is... Gah, I can't even find the words! Can we keep the wreck of the Yasoshima Maru as a souvenir!?!" Ferrer scoffed with desperate sarcasm.

"Are there any new informations about the whole thing?" Friday asked, stopping Ferrer's rant, "we have received the preliminary report, but any more information could be useful..." she prodded him.

The Panamanian delegate sighed: "Apparently, the freighter was transporting a shipment of black market weapons from Yokohama, Japan to Caracas, Venezuela. The buyer is still unknown. Rogers intercepted the ship when it entered the Canal, approximately when the ship passed the Bridge of the Americas. It is possible they actually jumped on the ship from the bridge itself. The shipment was composed of some old assault rifles, mainly Kalashnikov AK-47s, and several explosives. Explosives that Morimoto's crew decided to blow up in a last ditch effort to get away from Rogers. They were powerful enough to punch a hole in the starboard side of the hull of the Yasoshima Maru. The ship immediately started to list and veered to the right, beaching itself within sight of Balboa Reach. Most of the ship is still over water, but the main problem seems to be the narrow space of maneuver for the salvaging operations," Ferrer answered analytically. Then his face darkened again:

"Rogers needs to be stopped. He's already smashed an airport, nearly destroyed a nuclear facility and now this? He belongs in a cell..."
"Do the Avengers have any lead on Rogers?" asked Carlos Barrero, from Argentina, steering the conversation onto the main topic of the meeting.

"We do," answered Hope, "we have a person who was really close to Scott Lang that has agreed to warn us as soon as any useful information becomes available. And when it does, we are ready to strike..."

During the entire meeting, Tony wasn't hearing a single thing. He was still thinking about Wanda. He wasn't gonna let her out. The mere thought was just ridiculous. She had broken dozens of laws and she had to pay for it. Period.

But... He felt like the treatment she was receiving wasn't right. It was just-

"Mr. Stark?"

His name being called brought his attention back to the meeting. He shook his head: "I'm sorry, can you repeat?" he asked, vaguely awkward.

"Do you agree with Ms. Van Dyne? Will the Avengers be ready the next time Rogers resurfaces?" asked Ferrer again, a little impatiently.

"Uh, yes, sir. As soon as we get a hit, we will be ready to intervene," he assured.

"Good," Ferrer growled, "I really look forward to having words with him."

"Many people do, Delegate Ferrer," commented Kurt Leutjens from Germany. Cozmin Antonescu, from Romania, nodded gravely in agreement.

As the meeting was adjourned, Friday looked at Tony with worry in her eyes. He was so distracted today... and he also went to visit Maximoff.

No one could convince her the two things weren't related.

***

"So you noticed that too," Pepper surmised, leaning back in her chair with a thoughtful expression. Friday gave her a questioning look.

"I called him today for an update on some SI projects," Pepper clarified, "he answered all my questions with monosyllables. At first I thought he was stressed, but stress never caused him to be like that before. This sudden change in his behaviour is pretty odd indeed..."

"It's Maximoff," Friday replied with conviction, "she's up to something..."

"I thought her powers were suppressed?" Pepper asked worriedly.

"I don't know," Friday answered, "that suppressor has never been tested on anyone except her. Anyway, it's no coincidence that Boss went to visit her today."

"No, you're right..." Pepper sighed. A long moment of silence passed before she spoke again: "Well, whatever the case may be, the sooner we get Maximoff transferred out of the Compound, the better."

"Agreed. And I might have found a way for that to happen," Friday said with smug satisfaction in her voice.
Pepper's head perked up in interest: "Have you found someone who could take her and that the Committee would approve?"

Friday smirked: "I did. It wasn't easy, but in the end I've found someone who seems practically tailored for the job of keeping Wendy Wonka at bay," she said, handing her mother a tablet with her latest research.

Chapter End Notes

Wanda's powers are mostly working on Tony's subconscious. The dreams he gives him are a sort of manifestation of her influence, but the effect goes much further than just giving Tony a nice memory. So Tony finds himself feeling for Wanda's plights, and he's even starting to be attracted by her... but he can't really point his finger on the reason why he feels like that. Also, he's still pretty far from doing anything he might regret. For now, at least.
Lately, T'Challa had been thinking a lot about paradoxes.

For example: he was the Black Panther. The strongest warrior in Wakanda, now known for his strength and prowess in battle even to the rest of the world. And yet, his strength and battle skills had been for naught against a skinny woman in high heels.

Virginia Potts had him cornered. One wrong move, and she could destroy him. If she were to reveal what she had on him, she could practically overthrow him.

And that was a paradox: him, the King of Wakanda, destined to the throne since the day he was born, forced into compliance and submission by a woman that Steven Rogers had once referred to, whilst conferring with T'Challa and trying to change his mind about the Accords, as 'just some sort of glorified secretary'.

*If that was a secretary, I am Helmut Zemo,* T'Challa thought. Tony Stark sure had chosen well when he had appointed his successor as CEO of his company. He was curious about what that 'secretary' was would do to Steve Rogers if she could have a go at him.

Another, more immediate paradox was the one in the middle of which the young king was presently finding himself: having to rely on his sister - the Princess - to save his throne and remain King.

"Brother, with all due respect," Shuri sighed, "what you ask of me, it's impossible."

"Shuri, you always told me that if I needed your help, all I had to do was ask. Well, I am asking now..." he said, frustrated.

"Yes, you are asking, but you not for my help," Shuri replied condescendingly, "you are asking for a miracle. We have to face the truth, brother: you have made a mistake, and the repercussions are inevitable."

"Repercussions? That is putting it mildly, sister," the young king gritted out, "if Virginia Potts, or anyone else in Stark's entourage, releases what she has threatened to, it will spell disaster for our country. Such information would do us in. Wakanda risks a civil war. A *real* civil war, completely different from the scuffle that tore apart the Avengers. Anarchy, devastation, death on our streets. Is that what you want, sister?"
T'Challa had let all his frustration and anger bleed into his words in an effort to make her understand, and he nearly got the opposite reaction. Shuri was bristling in rage: "And who are we to blame for that, brother?", she retorted with a vicious expression on her young, beautiful face.

T'Challa lowered his head, conceding to her point: "Me," he simply muttered.

"You," Shuri agreed. "You welcomed that group of dangerous terrorists and their delusions of grandeur into our very home. And why did you do that? Because despite preparing for the throne for all your life, your first decision as King was to wage war on a man whom you later found out was innocent of what you held against him. It all spiraled because of that decision, T'Challa. It was a mistake, and mistakes bear consequences."

T'Challa clenched his fists: "I wanted to atone for that mistake!" he retorted hotly. "You said it yourself: James Barnes was innocent--"

"Of what you held against him," Shuri repeated patiently, as if talking to a small child, "He was being framed for Helmut Zemo's action in Vienna, but his actions afterwards are not those of an innocent man. Bucharest, Berlin, Leipzig, Siberia, Pennsylvania and now Panama. James Barnes is not, T'Challa, an innocent man."

"Still, I had wronged him. I had to atone," T'Challa replied stubbornly.

"You still think too much like the Black Panther and too little like the King of Wakanda. They are one and the same in you, but you can't favor one while tainting the other." Shuri interrupted him, as frustrated as he was.

"It's not as easy as you imagine," T'Challa relented, deflating.

Shuri's frustration seemed to quell a bit: "I know, brother. I cannot imagine how difficult this must be for you, but you can't afford such misjudgements."

"I am trying. I am trying to do better, but I need this Sword of Damocles off my head! Can't you ask the Accords Committee to do something about it?" T'Challa asked.

Shuri's frustration came back with a vengeance: "And how, pray tell, do you expect me to ask that of the Committee, without revealing your involvement with Rogers to the Committee in the first place!?!" she said, raising her voice.

T'Challa flinched. Normally, such a behaviour towards the King would have been considered unacceptable, even for another member of the Royal Family, but this time, the Dora Milaje in the room didn't move a finger.

Not that T'Challa blamed them. Because really, how indeed?

Shuri shook her head: "If we truly want Tony Stark not to act on his threat, there is only one way. We will have to buy his silence."

The king perked up: "You don't mean..."

Shuri nodded gravely.

T'Challa's expression became shocked: "No. We can't. You can't! If we start to allow foreigners to-"

"Can you propose a better alternative, your Majesty?" Shuri interrupted sarcastically, spitting her brother's title scornfully. T'Challa lowered his eyes, but she wasn't done yet: "You put us in this
situation. It is because of you that we have to do this. It’s the only thing we have to offer."

Her brother weakly shook his head: "I could abdicate. Recuse the throne..."

"And you think Stark will care if you do?"

The king's head dipped in shame and defeat. His sister was right: he, personally, had nothing to offer to Tony Stark. But Wakanda did.

It felt completely, utterly, fundamentally wrong. But the death of their father had caused a lot of unrest in Wakanda. If T'Challa became compromised now, there was no telling what could happen.

For the sake of their country, it had to be done.

"You have my blessing, sister. I'll allow you to do this as you see fit," T'Challa finally relented. Before he dismissed her, however, he put his hands on his Shuri's shoulders affectionately and gave her a worried look: "But remember, be wary of Stark and his people. They are much more dangerous than they let on."

"I will, brother," Shuri replied, "though I do believe they are only dangerous for those who cross them."

***

It was very difficult to throw Pepper Potts off her game. Negotiation and business agreements had been her bread and water for most of her life.

But when a man that was supposed to be a world-renowned neurosurgeon strolled into the hall of Stark Tower dressed like something between an asian monk and a medieval fairytale mage, and then his cape floated off his shoulders and levitated away from him to go hang itself on the nearest coat rack, even she was left speechless for a moment.

"Miss Potts, nice to meet you," the man greeted, extending his hand and smiling, as if the gravity defying cloak was no big deal.

Pepper had to take a moment to shook herself out of her daze. Considering we've called this guy specifically to deal with Maximoff's magic, something like a flying cloak was to be expected, come to think of it. She took his hand and shook it: "Doctor Strange, I'm glad you agreed to this meeting," she replied professionally.

"What can I say, you intrigued me. It's not often that the Masters of the Mystic Arts get a call by a... foreigner, so to speak. Add to that that you called me to deal with what, from what I understand, is alien magic, and we can safely say that you definitely caught my attention."

"Well then, shall we discuss the problem at hand?" Friday asked, all business. Pepper noted that apparently, the girl hadn't been fazed as much as herself by the floating cloak. Maybe she had already found out about that when she had researched this man.

Friday also seemed to be in a hurry. With that, Pepper could relate. She too wanted the witch away from Tony as soon as possible.

Strange sat down on a couch: "Absolutely," he agreed, as Friday and Pepper sat down across from him.

"Here's the thing," the former surgeon started, "You've probably called the right guy, but I'm still not
sure about the whole situation. That's why I wanted to discuss things in person..."

"It's only fair," Pepper agreed.

Friday started to explain: "As you know, the Avengers have captured the Scarlet Witch and have been detaining her at the Avengers Compound ever since. So far, she hasn't caused problems, and we've felt that we could safely keep her contained until now, because her telepathic powers are ineffective on both me and Vision. However, this was never meant to be a definitive solution. Maximoff was to be transferred out of the Compound as soon as effective means to safely detain her were found..."

"And that's why you called me, correct?" Strange interjected.

"Yes," Friday confirmed, "for that reason and also because lately, I can't shake the feeling that Maximoff's up to something. That's why we want her removed as soon as possible. We have always assumed we had her handled, but I'm not so sure anymore..."

"Well, it's not outside the realm of possibility," the doctor reasoned, "Maximoff's magic is alien in nature. It comes from an Infinity Stone..."

"Does that cause a problem?" Pepper interrupted.

Strange eyed her smugly: "If you're asking whether she's too powerful for us to handle, the answer is no. I have harnessed the power of an Infinity Stone myself before, and I know how to deal with it. The problem is that if I agree to help you, I will have to sign the Accords... just to be clear, I've read the entire document and I have no problems with signing it, but it's not just about me in this case. Some of my colleagues tend to scrunch their noses at the idea of United Nations oversight. Many of them are sworn to secrecy, and some practices at Kamar Taj are best kept away from the public. So I need to ask you this before I agree to anything: I've read a clause about registered enhanced working with non-registered ones. Would it apply in this case too?"

"Yes. The clause you're referring to was part of the latest amendments of the Accords, about non-signatory enhanced that are associated with signatory ones," Friday explained quickly, having expected the question, "in this specific case, if one or more of your associates that haven't signed the Accords help you with detaining Maximoff, all you have to do is vouch for them to the Accords Committee. If you do that, they won't need to sign the Accords to help you and they won't ever need to even appear in front of the Committee unless they cause harm to people or things..."

"We don't want to force anybody into signing," Pepper pointed out, "that's one of the things Steve Rogers didn't understand about the Accords, and we don't want anyone else to make the same mistake: you only have to sign if you act publicly with your enhancements. If you don't want to sign, all you have to do is keep your powers to yourself and not cause trouble."

Strange nodded, content with the women's explanation: "Perfect. I'll explain that to my associates."

"Do you think they will agree to these terms?" Friday asked.

Strange gave her a long look: "I'll be frank with you: Maximoff has been person of interest among the sorcerers of Kamar Taj ever since the Avengers Civil War. A woman running around blowing shit up with what everyone refers to as 'magic' and calling herself the 'Scarlet Witch' puts all of us in a bad light. Nobody cares that her magic is different than ours. We want her leashed and muzzled as much as you and the Avengers do. So no, I don't think there will be any objections."

"That is good to know. When will you be able to take the witch in your custody?" Pepper wanted to
"Wong is a very efficient man," Strange smirked, "He'll have everything arranged in a couple of days after I get the paperwork done on my end..."

At the questioning looks the two women gave him, the sorcerer shook his head, smiling: "Wong is a librarian at Kamar Taj. He's the funniest man ever. Huge Beyoncé fan," he laughed to himself.

"Okay..." Friday said, "we will be ready to transfer Maximoff as soon as the Committee agrees to leave her into your custody," she stated, a bit apprehensively. She really couldn't wait to get rid of that witch.

"Good," Strange nodded, satisfied. "I'll pick her up as soon as we're ready for her. A couple of days, maybe three," he said, holding out his hand.

"Thank you, Doctor," Pepper greeted, shaking his hand, "we appreciate your help."

The sorcerer smirked a really Tony-like smirk: "I aim to please."

***

It was later that day that Friday received the best news ever: the Committee had discussed the Maximoff situation with Strange and had given the all-clear. Soon, the little witch was gonna be out of her hair, hopefully forever. Another forty-eight hours, at most.

Friday was elated, as she made her way to Wanda's cell with her dinner on a tray on one hand.

Wanda's cell was made of concrete, but the wall facing the corridor was bomb-proof glass, so that it could always be seen where Wanda was in the room. When Friday reached her destination, she found her sitting on the floor, propped against the glass. It was a favourite position of Wanda, with her back turned to the corridor. Now that Friday thought of it, it should have been enough of a hint that she had been up to no good...

She banged twice on the wall with her free hand: "Step away from the door," she ordered. However, her tone lacked the usual harshness she normally reserved to the other girl. Maybe her joy about Wanda's imminent relocation was showing.

The witch complied without protests, as she usually did. Only this time, she never took her eyes off Friday as the redhead put her tray down on the metal surface welded on the far wall acting as a table.

Friday stared back at her: there was curiosity in Maximoff's eyes. Maybe even a hint of suspicion.

"What?" Friday demanded harshly, tired of that analytical stare.

Wanda flinched: "N-nothing," she stuttered.

Friday eyed her back for a moment before rolling her eyes.

"Thank God that in a couple of days she's finally gonna be someone else's problem," she thought, making to leave.

She didn't notice Wanda's eyes bulging as she turned around.

She didn't notice Wanda's powers reading that thought and then looking deeper in her mind trying to understand what it meant.

She didn't notice Wanda's shocked expression when, not five seconds later, she actually found out the truth.
She didn't notice any of that, as she left the room, locked the door behind her and left.

Alone again, Wanda took a couple of steps backwards until she stumbled on her mattress and fell down on it, eyes wide and unseeing.

They were gonna move her out of the Compound. Send her away to someone that could potentially be able to lock her powers entirely, or maybe even strip her of them altogether.

They were gonna deny her the last chance she was gonna have. They were gonna take her away from Tony.

She looked at the still untouched tray of food on the small table, and immediately, the last meal of a prisoner sentenced to death came to her mind.

*I have to do something...***

Saying that Bucky was grateful to Hydra for the things he had learned being the Winter Soldier was ridiculous. But it was undeniable that, in all his years as Hydra's crown jewel, he had developed an instinct that was extremely useful and never wrong.

And his instinct told him that Oliver Caldwell was hiding something.

It was barely noticeable, but it was there. Sometimes, Bucky caught the former SHIELD agent staring at him just a moment too long. Other times, he saw him frown thoughtfully - knowingly - at his friends and at Steve's team as they discussed. No one would have given such little things a second thought. But ever since freeing himself from Hydra, Bucky wasn't very inclined to blindly trust people.

He had never told anyone about his suspicions, however. Steve probably wouldn't have believed him, and Caldwell's friends would have sided with their colleague. Plus, he didn't really have anything on Caldwell other than a few thousand yard stares, after all.

Or rather, he didn't have anything until now.

It all happened in an instant. Caldwell was following Sutherland in the garage. Bucky was just passing by. There was no one else around.

It sounded horribly cliché, but Bucky could have sworn he saw it happen in slow motion: Sutherland opened the door to the garage and stepped inside. Behind him, Caldwell looked Bucky right in the eye and sent him an evil smirk, while his right hand moved behind his back under his jacket and came out holding a Beretta 9mm with a silencer, right before he followed Sutherland inside the garage.

Bucky acted on instinct: he sprinted to the door as fast as he could. But despite everything, the surprise had been too much.

He wasn't fast enough. He barely made it to the door as he heard Caldwell's voice call: "Hey, Todd..." Sutherland turned around and was faced with Caldwell's gun pointed right between his eyes. There was a muffled sound, and Sutherland dropped dead to the floor.

Bucky's brain switched objective from saving Sutherland to stopping Caldwell in a split second, his body never losing momentum. But as it turned out, it was just what Caldwell wanted.
There was a single word murmured: "Sputnik."

Bucky felt his whole body seize against his will as his eyes widened in horror. He fell to the ground right on top of Sutherland's corpse.

As he lost consciousness, he realized he had walked right into Caldwell's trap. He saw the traitor open the trunk of Edwards' Range Rover and then grab him under his armpits and lift him into the back of the SUV.

He had been an idiot. All this time Caldwell had only been waiting for the right opportunity, and he had served it to him on a silver platter.

He felt his consciousness slip away rapidly, as Caldwell grabbed Sutherland's body and threw it in the trunk of the car with Bucky. He saw the man close the trunk and then heard the engine start before he blacked out completely.

***

"Cassie is okay, right?" Scott asked.

On the other side of the phone, Luis sighed: "Yeah, she's fine, man. She's happy."

"Good. Tell her that her daddy loves her and will be home soon."

"I will, Scotty. Promise."

"Alright. Thanks Luis. I really appreciate what you do for me."

"How're you doing, Scotty?" Luis queried then, trying to sound casual.

"Eh, we've hit a few roadblocks. These SHIELD guys are being a bit difficult, but Cap and Hank have them handled," Scott said. Luis then heard someone else in the background say "He was here ten minutes ago, Steve! He probably just went to the bathroom!"

"What was that?" asked Luis. "Um... I have to go. Apparently that Barnes guy has wandered off," Scott answered, "Cap tends to get a bit antsy if he doesn't have him around at all times. Not that I can blame him, those two are best bros after all, and look what Barnes has been through..."

"Well, okay, I'll leave you to it then."

"Yeah. I'll call you back in a few days. See you, Luis."

The line dropped.

Luis took a deep breath, looking at the phone for two long minutes. The he called another number.

Hope van Dyne picked up at the first ring: "Luis?"

"Yeah, hello, ma'am..." Luis started awkwardly.

"Have you got something?" hope asked, not losing time in any formalities.

Luis fell into his usual routine and started to blab: "Yeah, I do. So, check this out, Ma'am: I was at a vintage furniture market with my cousin Miguel, it was mostly Liberty style stuff... Ya, know, I'm more a Louis XIV type, but there was this mahogany vanity that was just-"
"Luis, get to the point!" Hope spat.

The man flinched. Scott was a lot more patient than this chick: "Okay, okay, alright... Well, Scott called," he said, before sighing, "I don't have an exact address, but... he said something about an abandoned airfield somewhere outside Philadelphia..."


Luis sighed again, lowering the phone from his ear: "I hope so," he muttered to himself.

***

Bucky had just started to come to his senses as a powerful electrical discharge surged through his body, making his nerves explode in pain. It lasted for a good half minute before it stopped.

He barely had time to catch his breath as he tried to understand what he'd gotten himself into: his arms and legs were bound, and much as he tried to break loose and even despite his enhanced strength, the bonds didn't budge. He was in a weird position, half sitting and half laying down. But the two metal pads covering half his face were the most important clue.

They had put him in the chair. The chair they used to wipe him before and after the Soldier's mission.

"I'd ask if you slept well, but I'm kind of in a hurry," somebody said.

Caldwell, Bucky's mind supplied, he... That other guy is dead... Todd Sutherland, he is-

His thoughts were cut off by another electrical surge, more powerful than before. He didn't see, didn't hear, didn't feel anything other than pain anymore. He screamed, but he knew it was in vain.

This time, the agony lasted more than a minute, and when it finally ended, Bucky's mind was too scrambled to think. But what came next provoked a reaction in him anyway: utter, visceral fear.

"Zhelanye."

Bucky's eyes widened, still unfocused but trying frantically to find an escape.

"Rzhavyy."

No... No, not again... Please...

"Semnadstat'."

The electroshock had stopped, but Bucky screamed again.

"Rassvet. Pech'. Deviat'."

He started trashing as hard as he could. I... have to... get away! Have... to...

"Dobroserdechnyy. Vozyrashcheniye na rodinu. Odin."

One last scream, louder than the others, tore out of him. Then, Bucky would remember nothing but darkness.

"Gruzovoy vagon."

The screaming and trashing abruptly stopped. Once again, James Barnes had ceased to exist.
Caldwell's figure slowly came into focus in front of the person that had taken his place: "Dobrye utro, Soldat."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, that happened. Because things apparently weren't already complicated enough.
An eventful night

Chapter Summary

Both Caldwell and Wanda make their move.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, and merry Christmas (or your equivalent holiday)! As a gift for you, here's the longest chapter I have ever written for this story! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hope and Friday were in the main armory, having just finished testing their new 'secret move' they'd been working on that would allow them to work in tandem on their next mission. Now, while Hope ran maintenance on the Wasp suit, Friday was working on what she called a 'side project'. Hope had immediately recognized as an improved version of the suppressor collar that blocked Wanda's powers.

She was about to offer Friday her help when Luis called.

Tony, informed of the new developments, had tasked the young girl with finding everything she could about this abandoned airfield in Philadelphia. Friday did that remotely, using her computers, while she finished her work on Wanda's collar with Hope's help. This new version should contain the witch's powers much more effectively.

Friday seemed stressed lately, and clearly it had to do with Maximoff. Hope was as glad as everybody else that she was finally going to be moved out of the compound. Even more if that took some weight off Friday's shoulders.

It was two hours later when Friday completed her research, and the Avengers were called to assemble in the conference room.

Tony was the last to arrive, Hope noticed. Odd, he was usually the first one there and the last one to leave when the Avengers were concerned. Still, he seemed a bit more into the game than he was when they had that conference call with the Accords panel regarding the Yasoshima Maru.

"So, we might finally have a lead on Steve Rogers," Friday started when everyone was seated, "Our informant mentioned an abandoned airfield in the area of Philadelphia, and our satellites might have found something."

The flat screen on the wall opposite to the table lit up, showing a satellite image of a small airfield. There was only a single airstrip, two hangars and a small control tower.

"It's a rather secluded place," Friday explained, "forty-five minutes by car from the city. It used to be a private airfield for small aircrafts. From 1992 to 2003 it also housed a parachute school, but it's been closed since 2006."
"How do we know it's the right place?" Rhodey asked.

"Well, two years ago the property was bought by a private investor, one Jeremy Teague," Friday answered, "but apparently the facility has seen limited use ever since. I say 'apparently', because the electrical consumption has been so high in the last ten months that the place has even been outfitted with a secondary generator, independent from the public power grid..."

"Hm. A semi-abandoned airstrip shouldn't need so much electricity..." Hope mused.

"Indeed," Friday agreed, "so I researched this Jeremy Teague individual..."

A picture of a driving license appeared on the screen, replacing the image of the airfield. The man on the license looked like he was in his late fifties or early sixties. Both Natasha and Sharon perked up at seeing his face.

Friday was slightly gloating as she continued: "I ran facial recognition and-"

"Hey, that's Liam Edwards!" Sharon exclaimed, interrupting her.

"Who?" Rhodey asked.

"Liam Edwards. I worked with him a few times at SHIELD. He was assigned to my department," Sharon clarified.

"Yeah, he was one of the top agents. Level Nine clearance," Natasha added.

Everybody turned to Friday for confirmation, but the girl took a moment to scowl at the two former agents.

"What?" asked Sharon innocently, slightly cowed by Friday's glare.

Tony's daughter sighed and shook her head: "So much for my dramatic revelation," she muttered to herself. "Yes, his real name is Liam Edwards, former agent of SHIELD. What makes him relevant for us is that, before working with Miss Carter and Miss Romanoff, he used to work closely with Hank Pym during his stint as the first Ant Man at the orders of SHIELD."

"So you think Hank went to his old friend for help after San Francisco?" Hope asked. Everybody had noticed her calling her father 'Hank', but no one said anything about it.

"I think it's worth getting a closer look at this airfield," Friday conceded.

"Agreed," Tony finally spoke. He still had a bit of a distant expression, but Hope was relieved to see him taking charge.

Tony leaned forward: "Wasp, I think you're the best suited for some recon work. Get ready, Sharon will take you there with a Quinjet."

"Aye, sir," Hope nodded, standing up.

"And Hope? I know you're eager to kick a couple of asses on Rogers' team, but for now you're just gathering info. Do not engage unless absolutely necessary, is that clear?"

"Understood," Hope assured.

"Alright. Make contact us as soon as you find something," Tony concluded.
"He was here... he was here just fifteen minutes ago..." Steve muttered desperately, pacing like a caged animal. How could he have lost sight of Bucky just like that?

He was sure something bad had happened. But it was the fact that he couldn't figure out what had happened and how it had happened that was driving him crazy.

Sam tried to comfort him: "Steve, calm down. We'll find him, I promise."

Steve didn't have the time to answer that, as Edwards stormed into the room and raised his gun right at Steve's face. Sam and Hank immediately took a step back and Scott got up from the chair where he was sat: "Hey! Whoa! What the hell are you doing?" he yelled, raising his hands as if Edwards was pointing the gun at him instead of at Steve. Leary was confused, but seeing her friend acting so aggressively she instinctively drew her gun too.

"I've found blood on the garage floor," Edwards seethed, "My car is missing and both Oliver and Todd are nowhere to be found! What game are you playing at, Rogers!?" he asked.

"Are you out of your mind!?" Steve shouted, his confusion and nervousness reaching new heights, "Bucky is missing too! I could be asking you the same thing!" "Yeah, very funny! Neither Todd nor Oliver are brainwashed super assassins! Your friend Barnes is! I want to know what he did!"

"That's what we're trying to find out!" Hank exclaimed, "Put the gun down, Liam!"

"Shut your mouth, Pym!" Edwards retorted, moving his gun from Steve's face to Hank's, "You think I forgot your little blackmail speech?"

At this point, Leary had raised her gun too, pointing it at Steve. The situation was degenerating fast, and Hank felt like he had to find an answer that would calm the spirits.

But he never had the chance.

A window on the left wall shattered and something landed on the floor.

"Grenade!" Sam shouted. Everybody ducked for cover, but it was useless. The blow knocked everybody head over heels.

Steve's ears were ringing badly, as his eyesight slowly refocused. He realized that the blast hadn't cause any damage to the room, and nobody seemed to be hurt, although everyone had been knocked unconscious. A stun grenade. And a pretty powerful one, too.

Normally, stun grenades weren't powerful enough to make people loose consciousness, but apparently this one had been juiced up. It was probably only thanks to the serum that he hadn't been knocked out like the others.

SHILED used to have some equipment like that back in the day... and as a result, so did Hydra.

Could it be-

Steve's ears were still ringing as Bucky's figure appeared from the smoke, holding a gun. He barely had the time to register the lifeless expression of the Winter Soldier on his friend's face when, seeing him move, Bucky opened fire.

Steve ducked for cover behind a table and knocked it over. Bucky started shooting blindly at the flat
wooden surface, grazing Steve's shoulder with one bullet, as he moved towards Hank's unconscious form, grabbed him by the scruff and threw him over his shoulder. Steve tried to get out from his hiding spot, but Bucky shot again, forcing him to duck back under the table.

The super soldier could hear Bucky's footsteps moving quickly towards the exit. In a last ditch effort to stop him, to fix this, he kicked the table towards the door. It hit the wall and broke in half, but Bucky was already gone.

What happened!? Did they trigger him again!? HOW!? Steve's mind raced.

About ten seconds later, he heard two very loud explosions one after the other.

When he looked out of the window, he saw the two helicopters in flames and the old Quinjet taking off.

No! NO!! I have to stop him!

Acting almost by instinct through the utter dismay that was clouding his mind, Steve scrambled towards Sam and crouched down at his side: "Sam! Sam, wake up!"

"I don't wanna..." the former pararescue slurred.

Steve was getting more and more desperate with each passing second: "Come on, Sam! I need your help, Bucky's getting away! We have to do something!"

When Sam uttered some more unintelligible words, Steve dragged him out of the room and into the garage, grabbing Scott as well along the way.

Hang on, Bucky. I'm coming.

***

"Whoa... what happened down there?" Hope asked, seeing the black column of smoke erupting from the two burning helicopters. The fires were melting with the orange from the setting sun.

"I don't know, but someone's leaving," Sharon answered, "at our two o'clock, can you see it?" she asked, pointing at the departing aircraft with her finger.

Hope squinted in the direction Sharon was indicating. Sure enough, a plane was taking off. It looked like a SHIELD quinjet, just like the one Barton, Maximoff and Wilson had in San Francisco.

"Should we call the police and maybe Vision to investigate the airfield while we follow that plane or do you want to land and take a closer look yourself?" Sharon asked then.

Hope's eyes narrowed for a moment: "No. Tell Vision to get here. We'll follow the jet," she decided.

***

Hank came to his senses in a room without windows and a single, closed door. The only furniture was a metal table and the chair to which he was tied.

In a corner of the room, Barnes stood at attention with a blank face, while Caldwell was leaning on the table with his arms crossed and a satisfied smirk.

"Oliver," Hank called, using his first name to try and appear friendly, despite guessing that Caldwell was going to be anything but, "What the hell happened?"
Caldwell's sneer darkened: "Oh, I'll tell you what happened. I was a level nine agent at SHIELD. I was successful, and respected. But then your all-American friend decided that because Hydra had infiltrated SHIELD, the entire organization needed to be taken down. Suddenly I found myself on the streets, with every intelligence agency in the Western Hemisphere hot on my tail, and nothing but my skills to help me survive. I think you can imagine how I felt when you brought Steve Rogers to my doorstep, asking for our help. When it became clear that the others were willing to give you a chance, I decided to make a few plans of my own... I'm kinda sorry for Todd, but he's the one who brought you to us in the first place, so he had it coming. Liam wanted to give you the middle finger, but Todd..."

Hank bristled: "What did you do, Oliver?"

"I shot him through the head," Caldwell replied casually, "Quick and painless. I don't think he even realized what happened."

Hank erupted: "You bastard! How could you!? He was your friend! Are you another one of those Hydra fuckers!?"

Caldwell put a hand over his chest mockingly, feigning hurt: "Me? Hydra? Nah, don't be ridiculous. Did I ever tell you my old man was Jewish? I don't really get along with Nazis... No, I'm just a guy who saw an opportunity and caught it."

Hank didn't understand: "What are you talking about? What opportunity?"

"Him," Caldwell explained, tilting his head towards Barnes. "It wasn't difficult to get a hold of the Winter Soldier's user manual in the JCTC secure server. Rogers left Siberia only worrying about getting his BFF out of there, without paying any attention to what that guy Zemo left behind. At first I considered pitting the Soldier against Rogers just for shits and giggles, but I'm kinda getting old, I need to start thinking about my retirement..."

"Your retirement?" asked Hank, a little less belligerent.

"Sure. And you're gonna help me with it." Caldwell jeered.

Hank immediately made the connection: "You want the Pym particles..."

"Wow, you're so perceptive."

"Caldwell, if you think you can pull this off and somehow coerce me into working for you, you're gonna be disappointed. I don't care what you're gonna do to me, I'd rather shoot my own head off a hundred times over than have those particles on the black market," Hank bit out.

"Oh, I can tell. But I'm not the one who's gonna coerce you" Caldwell scoffed, pointing at the Soldier, "He's the one who knows more about coercion than you and I can ever learn... and he's the one you should worry about right now."

The Soldier stood straighter, ready to comply to whatever new orders his handler was about to give him, eyes were fixed on their captive who was starting to show fear in his expression.

A moment later, all of a sudden, the door of the room exploded inwards.

The Soldier acted fast, not even waiting for his handler to give him the order to eliminate the threat. In a split second, his mind assessed the situation: the door had been blown up from the outside. This was not in the mission parameters. Someone was trying to stop them.
He stalked to the opening of the door, gun raised, ready to eliminate any and all threats to the mission. He didn't go far.

He barely had the time to recognize the familiar sting of the electricity hitting him in the back of his neck before he dropped, nearly unconscious, as his mind was scrambled again by the electroshock.

Caldwell didn't have time to react either: as soon as the Wasp had dropped Bucky with her stingers, Sharon barged into the room with her gun drawn and opened fire. Her opponent didn't even have time to draw his own gun, as Sharon shot him three times in the forehead, throat and chest with deadly accuracy.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

Hope grew back to her normal size and took her helmet off, staring at her father.

He just glowered at her, as if she was the real bad guy in all this. As if she wasn't the one who had just saved his life, but instead the one who had tied him to that chair.

Hope just shook her head as she moved behind him and started to untie him: "You're under arrest, you know that, right?" she asked, as Sharon kept her gun trained on him.

Hank scowled. Stark had defeated him, and he knew it. It was over now. But that didn't mean his backstabbing daughter would get away with it: "You are a disgrace, Hope!" he grunted as she cuffed his hands behind his back, "your mother would be ashamed of you!"

Hope grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him around, grabbing him by the front of his jacket. She glared murderously at him, fighting back the urge to slap his ugly face until it was red like a tomato. But it wasn't worth it.

Her job here was done, and now Hank was finished: "Agent Thirteen," she called, "get this old geezer away from me before I punch his nose in." she said, shoving him towards Sharon.

The blonde took him by his left arm: "Let's go, old geezer," she said, as Hope turned her attention to the seemingly unconscious Winter Soldier.

But as she turned to face him, Bucky had gathered enough awareness to throw a kick in her direction, catching her square in the stomach. Hope stumbled backwards and dropped on all fours, gasping for air, while Barnes shot to his feet and bolted from the room. Sharon acted fast, holding Hank down and shooting at the fleeing soldier. She even clipped his left arm, but the bullet bounced uselessly on the steel plating.

Bucky ran. Sharon emptied the rest of her cartridge at him to try and incapacitate him, but he protected himself with his arm as he fled. She couldn't stop him.

"Son of a metal whore," she growled.

Hope slowly and shakily got to her feet: "I'm gonna find blood in my urine," she groaned, holding her stomach.

"Are you okay?" Sharon asked concerned, reloading her gun.

"Yeah, don't worry, I'm fine," Hope reassured, steadying herself, "Sneaky little bastard... I should have known that a normal stun charge wouldn't have been enough to drop him," she exclaimed.

"You thought you can defeat a super soldier just like that, brat? Well, think again! Oh, I'd love to see
"Stark's face when you tell him Barnes slipped through your fingers again!" Hank commented mockingly.

"Yeah? Well, personally I look forward to see your face when you'll get your sentence, old man," Sharon retorted. "You're going to prison now, in case it hasn't gotten through your thick skull yet. And you're gonna stay there for a long, long time. Let's go, Hope..." she called.

But Hope was still looking out the door, towards where Barnes had escaped.

"Hope?" Sharon called again.

"You take him in, Sharon. I'm going after Barnes, he might lead us to Rogers and the rest of his friends." Wasp answered resolutely.

"What? Are you sure?" Sharon asked, "He hit you pretty hard... you might be hurt..."

"I'm fine," Hope insisted, straightening herself and fighting back a wince, "and that super-hobo can't have gotten far. I can find him. After all, he can run, but he can't fly," she concluded, winking at Sharon.

The blonde said nothing. Hope grabbed her helmet and put it back on: "I'm not letting him get away again," she vowed, shrinking down and taking off.

***

The collar wasn't budging.

Wanda was trying as hard as she could to break it, but it wasn't working. That blasted thing was tough. She had waited until midnight to try and break it, but now she was wondering if she shouldn't have started trying a couple of hours earlier.

That would have been too risky, however: she needed to wait until she was reasonably sure her jailer was sleeping.

Her time was running out though. She was going to be transferred the next day; so she had to make her move tonight.

But that bloody collar wouldn't break.

_It's designed so that you shouldn't be able to break it, you idiot! Of course it's difficult to take it off!_ her mind supplied treacherously.

She frowned resolutely: _But I have to._

_I have to!_

She tried again, both tugging at the collar with her hands and using her telekinetic powers, lips pulled back from her teeth in a strained snarl.

_Come on... Come on!_

She put all her strenght, all her will in that supreme effort...

...and finally, finally, the collar gave.

She tore it apart, breaking it in two, and it felt glorious.
Her power surged inside her, finally free. She felt it burn through her veins like fire. It was amazing. The Scarlet Witch was back.

But now was not the time to revel in her newfound freedom. She still had to make things right.

Bursting through the door of her cell as if it was made of tissue paper, she started walking towards the living quarters.

She quickly assessed the situation: she couldn't feel Vision's presence in the Compound, he was probably out on a mission. Everyone else was still in their rooms... including Tony.

She couldn't have a better window of opportunity. It was now or never. She focused on Tony, only on Tony, as she started to make her way towards him.

Friday's computers registered Wanda's escape immediately. In her room, her eyes snapped open.

***

She had decided to take him back to Sokovia, to Strucker's fortress. She found it fitting: it was the place where it all started, for the two of them. It was there that she met him for the first time. And it was also the first time she had wronged him. So it would be here that she would make it right.

Recreating the environment was easy, thanks to Tony's eidetic memory: she simply had to pick it up from his brain and project it in the dream in which she was inducing him. She only changed her own appearance, dolling herself up a little... well, a lot. She was trying to make a good impression after all, and everything else aside, Tony deserved his dreams to be as nice as possible.

***

Tony twitched lightly in his bed, as he dreamed of opening the secret passage that would lead him to the dungeons of Strucker's fortress. Beside him, Pepper was sleeping soundly, blissfully ignorant of what was about to happen.

Wanda had just exited the detention area, and was still walking slowly towards Tony's bedroom, enveloped in the red mist of her powers. Giving Tony all her attention, she hadn't sensed Friday getting out of her bed and sprinting towards the armory, to retrieve the new collar she had made.

The witch was free. Friday had to hurry.

***

"Guys, I got Strucker," came Steve's voice through the comm. Tony halfheartedly replied: "Yeah. I got... something bigger."

The massive corpse of the Chitauri Leviathan was dangling ominously from the ceiling, but there was no sign of the scepter. Damn it, had they already smuggled it away? Thor was not gonna like this...

"Tony," a voice called. He turned, and suddenly, she was there.

He felt his palms go damp with sweat. She was gorgeous.

She was wearing a crimson evening dress that hugged her curves perfectly. Matching red lipstick seemed to promise him the sweetest things. Her mane of brown, waist-long hair was curled just so, and it even seemed of a lighter shade than normal. Her green eyes were circled in kohl, contrasting
with her alabaster skin.

She was otherworldly. So beautiful that for a fleeting moment, Tony wondered if she was even real. Somehow, she looked too beautiful to be true. She almost seemed wrong.

But that thought was immediately replaced by confusion when he saw what she was holding in her hands.

It was Loki’s scepter. She was holding it horizontally with both hands, as if offering it to him: "Look, Tony... I found it for you..." she said, holding the scepter a bit higher for him to see.

It was clear that Tony was too stunned to say anything. Wanda gave him a sad look: "I know you don't like people handing you things... but it's okay, Tony... You can take it..."

Hesitantly, Tony grabbed the scepter with one hand. Wanda's face lit up in a dazzling smile: "Thank you, Tony... I know it's hard for you to trust people, but I promise you, I will never, ever hurt you..."

Both were still hodling the scepter, slowly lowering it. Wanda inched closer to him: "You know that... Don't you, Tony?" she asked, saying his name as if it was the name of her long lost lover...

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Friday barged into the armory and grabbed the collar, immediately turning around and running towards Boss' bedroom.

Wanda had just arrived there. She barely spent a second to check Pepper was still sleeping, before she approached Tony.

***

She let go of the scepter and put her right hand on Tony's cheek: "You know you can trust me, Tony..."

His breath was getting short. He didn't really understand what was happening...

Wanda closed her eyes. Their faces were just a couple of inches apart now.

"Tony..." she whispered one last time, leaning in for a kiss.

***

Friday barged into the room and saw Wanda leaning down to kiss Tony in his sleep, her hands at either side of his face emanating that creepy red mist.

The murderous rage Friday felt in that moment could only be equated to what she had felt when Boss had been left to die in Siberia.

For the first time since she her body had been created, her eyes started glowing the same fiery Extremis glow as Tony's did in extreme conditions.

"Get away from him!" she shouted. Wanda didn't even have time to react as Friday body-slammed into her and tackled her to the floor.

Both Tony and Pepper woke up with a start. Tony was still dazed as he saw the two girls on the floor. In a few moments, Friday had the new power suppressor secured around Wanda's neck and had pinned the now harmless witch underneath her, holding Wanda's wrists to either side of her head.
and pressing a knee on her belly, severely hindering Wanda's breathing.

Tony was dazed: why was Friday attacking Wanda? What was going on?

"What's going on!??" asked Pepper slightly scared, as if she had read his mind.

"What the fuck have you done to him!? Answer me!" Friday demanded.

The other girl looked at Tony with scared eyes, but he was still way too confused to do anything more than stare at her like he'd just fallen from Cloud Nine.

He felt like he wanted to tell Friday to release her, but something told him it would be wrong...

Friday's face was contorted in pure rage. Her eyes were still glowing that ominous orange, making her look every bit as scary and demonic as Wanda did when she used her own powers.

Friday harshly slapped her on both cheeks: "I'm not going to ask you again, witch! What have you done!??"

Wanda still looked briefly at Tony, but it was clear that he was not gonna help her. He just looked lost, maybe even upset.

"T-this isn't what it looks like..." she finally blurted out.

"Oh, really? What part did I misinterpret!? You didn't escape from your cell, invade Boss' bedroom and start messing around with his mind!? Not to mention, tried to take advantage of him in his sleep!?" Friday retorted.

"What!?" Pepper shrieked at Friday's words.

Tony turned to her and suddenly, he started to piece things together: the dream... it had to have been Wanda's doing... Wanda was supposed to be in her cell...

Friday was right! What was Wanda doing in his bedroom!?

"What are you talking about!?" Tony heard himself asking.

"She tried to kiss you while you were sleeping, Boss!" Friday claimed. Then she turned to Wanda: "And it really didn't look like a goodnight kiss!"

Wanda felt so embarrassed that she just wanted the floor beneath her to open up and swallow her whole. How was she going to explain herself now?

"Friday, let her up..." Tony said calmly.

It took a few moments for the girl to comply. When she did, Wanda didn't get up from the floor, only getting to her knees.

"What are you doing here, Wanda?" Tony asked then.

There wasn't rage in his voice. He had all the right to be furious with her, but instead he was just asking for an explanation. Wanda felt like crying.

"Answer the question!" Friday shouted, her eyes still glowing.

Wanda visibly flinched: "I-I was... I was just... t-trying to m-make things right... to ap-apologize..."
she stuttered.

The next question came from Pepper: "Apologize for what, exactly?" she asked sternly. Clearly, she was much more angry than Tony was.

Tears started running down Wanda's face: "F-for... what I did to Tony... I was wrong... what I did with Ultron, and everything that came after that... it was unforgivable, I was trying to make it right..."

Tony looked even more confused: "So let me get this straight: you're sorry fro pushing me to reprise the Ultron project-"

"It's a lot more that that!" Wanda interrupted him, sounding desperate, "I- what I did afterwards was no better! I left you to shoulder all the blame when you weren't even at fault... Tony, I-I am so sorry... If I could take it all back I would, but... but I can't! I can't, but I really am sorry!"

Tony still had that lost expression in his eyes. Friday and Pepper looked absolutely enraged, but neither of them spoke.

"Tony... Please, tell me you understand..." Wanda pleaded.

Tony didn't answer, instead lying down on his bed and covering his face with his hands.

"Tony, please, say something..." Wanda begged again.

"What I understand is that you tried to apologize for fiddling with my head... by fiddling with my head," Tony murmured.

Wanda shook her head: "T-Tony, I-"

"Why the hell were you even trying to kiss me, anyway?" Tony asked then, looking at the ceiling.

Wanda didn't know how to answer. She stuttered something unintelligible, but other that that, she was just sobbing.

It was Friday who answered him: "I believe I know the answer: when you learned that you were wrong about Boss, your obsession towards him became less murderous and more... sentimental. Am I on the right track, witchy?" he seethed.

Wanda didn't even have time to deny what Friday was saying as the red-headed girl pressed on: "And so, you decided to just take what you wanted without caring about anything and anyone else. Because that's what you do, isn't it? You only think about yourself, you don't even know the meaning of the word 'consent'. So don't try and give us the 'I wanted to make amend' BS, it's not gonna fly. We know who you are, Maximoff. You were only entertaining yourself!" she added.

Wanda just looked at them pleadingly. She wanted to protest, to deny, but she was so embarrassed right now... she had never felt such shame...

"So... before she wanted to kill me, and now she wants to tap me? Is that what you're saying?" Tony asked Friday, who just kept staring at Wanda, disgusted. The new collar sealed Wanda's powers completely, but in that moment she could read only hatred on Tony's daughter's face.

"Alright, I've heard enough," Pepper declared, "Friday, please get her out of my sight." she growled.

Friday didn't need to be told twice. Her hand shot into Wanda's hair and she unceremoniously dragged the other girl out of the room.
"No, wait! Tony, please! Tony!" she called.

But no one listened to her pleas.

No reply came from the bedroom.

Nobody wanted to give her a chance anymore.

She had felt so much desperation and helplessness only once before. When she had sensed Pietro dying.

Now, she felt like she was dying too.

Friday dragged her by the hair all the way back to the detention wing. Since she had destroyed the door of her previous cell, Friday just went to the next one along the corridor.

She punched in the access code and, as soon as the door opened, she threw Wanda inside. The other girl lost her balance and fell forward. Friday didn't waste any time, grabbing her by the throat just under the collar and hoisting her up, holding her against the wall. Her eyes were still glowing with Extremis.

Wanda couldn't even talk. She was reduced to a desperate, terrified and ashamed crying mess.

"I distinctly remember telling you more than once that if you inconvenienced me, you would have regretted it dearly," Friday said.

Wanda felt Friday's hand growing hotter with Extremis and scalding her throat. Never before had she feared for her life like she did in that moment.

"Mercifully, you'll be shipped off tomorrow and won't be my headache anymore, so in this particular circumstance I'm willing to just keep you here for a few more hours, if only for the sake of avoiding more paperwork. But you can rest assured that I will make your new handlers know how unruly you can be, and I will highly recommend them to use the strictest methods they have at their disposal to keep you in line."

Wanda was trembling with fear as Friday came closer until she was barely six inches away from her face. "Tomorrow, we will part ways. After that, if you try to do something to the Boss again, if you try to approach him in any way, shape or form, if you so much as appear as a tiny dot on the horizon, I swear to you, I will make you wish you were back in the Raft, complete with that straitjacket! You know what they did to witches like you in the Middle Ages!? I will personally tie you on a pyre and burn you to ashes!" she vowed, her hand on Wanda's neck going even hotter, "Am I understood, Morgana!?"

"...y-yes," Wanda whimpered between sobs.

"I didn't hear you!" Friday shouted.

"Yes!" Wanda exclaimed again.

Finally, Friday released her. Wanda fell to the floor like a sack of potatoes, holding her throat, trying to move the collar up to soothe the pain.

Friday hadn't burned her, but she almost wished she had. She felt lower than dirt.

"Evil piece of-" Friday muttered, slamming the door behind her.
"I'm not evil!" Wanda shrieked in protest.

No answer came. Wanda was left alone and defeated.

She had screwed up again. It was all she was able to do, apparently: cause troubles and make a mess of everything she touched.

She curled up in a ball and hugged her knees: "I'm not evil," she repeated before she started sobbing again.

***

Inside Tony's bedroom, Pepper laid down beside him on their bed, taking his hand.

Tony felt better immediately, as they both stared at the ceiling: Pepper grounded him. She always had. She was the order in his chaos.

After a long time, she broke the silence:

"I want a suit."

***

Bucky let out a pained noise.

It had happened again.

He didn't know where he was. He didn't know where Steve was. He didn't know anything anymore.

It felt like Washington all over again. After the Triskelion, he had just ran away. He hadn't known where to go, what to do. He had just known he had to get away. Now, he felt just like that, all over again.

His mind was a mess. He could feel the Soldier just under the surface, trying to get out. His thoughts were confused, incoherent, jumbled together...

His handler was dead... was that his handler?

Caldwell, right? Or was it Sutherland? What was the mission!?

What had he done? What had they made him do this time?

He shook his head and tried to focus, but he couldn't. He was too agitated. He felt like he couldn't even breathe.

This was never supposed to happen. Why hadn't they left him alone in Bucharest?

Why hadn't he stayed in Wakanda?

He felt like his head was exploding.

*I can't do this... I need help...*

He did need help.

He couldn't deny it anymore. He needed help, help that Steve couldn't give him. Besides, he didn't know where Steve was, or what had happened to him.
He couldn't go back to Steve. And that left him with only one option.

He tried to even out his breathing and looked up with determination. A plan was starting to form in his head.

As he started down the road towards Philadelphia, in the darkness of the night, he didn't notice the Wasp looking down at him from a nearby rooftop.

Chapter End Notes

...No rest for the wicked.

As usual, the next update will be in two weeks time, so I'm wishing you a happy new year now. See you all in 2018!
The set up

Chapter Summary

Strange takes Wanda in his custody. Shuri cleans up after her brother and the Bucky situation reaches a boiling point.

Chapter Notes

As the title says, this chapter sets up the climax of the story. Meaning that the final showdown is not so far away ;-).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wanda had lost everything.

She had had one last chance, and she had blown it. Like she always did.

Because that was the truth. She destroyed everything she touched. Maybe it was for the best that Friday had stopped her before she could truly get to Tony.

Tony was a wonderful man, and he had already been through enough. He definitely didn't need the added burden of having to deal with her emotional baggage on top of his own.

Besides, what had she thought was gonna happen if she had her way? That Potts would just step aside and let her have her man? That Friday would just do a one-eighty and accept her into her family after everything she had put her father through?

She had been such a fool. Again.

That's why she hadn't succeeded in the end. I never had a chance with Tony. Ever. He's a billion times better than what I will ever deserve.

He's like an angel. A beautiful armoured angel. I'm just a... a freak.

We can never be together.

When morning came and the door finally opened, Friday entering the room to collect her, Wanda never took her eyes off her own shoes.

She willingly and meekly offered her wrists, and the other girl immediately cuffed her. Then Friday grabbed her elbow and started leading her out.

Neither spoke until they were outside. There, three men she didn't know were waiting for her. Two of them were dressed with monk-like clothes, one of them white and the other asian. The third man was dark-skinned, and wore a business suit.

"Ms. Maximoff," the man in the suit spoke, "I'm Isaiah Bradley, US representative of the Sokovia
Accords Committee. Meet Dr. Strange and Wong. You are now officially in their custody. Ms. Stark, if you would please uncuff the prisoner..."

"Of course, Delegate Bradley," Friday answered, taking Wanda's cuffs by the chain and starting to remove them.

The man called Strange addressed her then: "Will you cause trouble if we take that collar off?" he asked, a bit too condescendingly for Wanda's taste.

She was really tempted to tell him to go screw himself, but what would be the point? It wasn't like she still had anything to fight for, anyway. And besides... she really wanted that damn collar off.

She didn't trust her voice not to break, so she answered simply by shaking her head no.

When Friday finally took the collar off, her powers again came alive inside her. It was disheartening how different the sensation felt from the night before: then, she had felt like she was invincible. Now, she only remembered Friday's haunting words from their first conversation: *revolting, messed up freak.*

Still, with her powers back, she was finally able to learn more about these people. Strange and Wong were powerful magic users, apparently. But she didn't care in the slightest.

She wanted to know where Tony was.

She instinctively, unconsciously, tried to look inside all of their heads to find out. Of course, Strange and Wong noticed.

"She's doing it..." Strange muttered to Wong. The other sorcerer held his hands up and drew an intricate pattern on thin air with his fingers.

Pain exploded in Wanda's head as she felt her powers be forcefully blocked. She squeezed her eyes shut and made a strained noise as she held her head in her hands. She couldn't even protest as the two sorcerers greeted Bradley and Friday:

"If that's all, I guess we will be going. Ms. Stark, Delegate Bradley..." Strange said.

"Thank you for your help, Dr. Strange," Friday responded. Then, Wanda heard a faint, swooshing sound before the pain in her head finally receded.

Wanda opened her eyes to find herself in a completely different room. There were several wooden columns all around, and the ceiling was also made of wood, decorated in squared patterns.

Friday and Bradley were nowhere to be seen.

"Where are we? Where did you take me?" Wanda wanted to know.

"This is Kamar Taj," Strange answered simply, as if that was enough to answer Wanda's question.

"Kamar Taj? What kind of name is that?" Wanda asked then.

Strange shrugged: "Well, we're in Nepal, so-

"Nepal!? Why did you take me to Nepal!?" Wanda demanded, slightly desperate.

"Because this is one of the very few places in the world where you can be contained safely. And, it's well removed from Tony Stark and the Avengers, so maybe that will lessen the temptation..."
Strange answered coyly.

Burning hot shame colored Wanda's cheeks. Again acting on instinct, she tried to peek into the mage's head to see how much he knew, but this time it felt like her powers were hitting a brick wall.

Strange rolled his eyes: "Here we go again. Wong?" he called.

Again, Wong used the same technique he had used moments earlier to painfully block her powers. This time, Wanda dropped to her knees. Wong let her suffer a few seconds more before releasing the hold on her powers.

Wanda shakily raised her head, on the verge of tears: "What did you do to me?" she whined.

"I countered your powers. That caused you to experience some backlash, hence the pain you're feeling. Don't worry, it will fade in a few minutes, unless of course you force me to block your powers again," Wong explained in a detached manner.

"But why!? I haven't done anything!" Wanda protested.

"Haven't done anything, huh?" Strange asked, "Poking around in people's minds is not doing anything for you?"

Wanda stumbled: "...I-"

"No," Strange interrupted her, "let me make one thing clear: the good old days when Captain America praised and coddled you are over. Here, there's no one who will give you some asinine motivational speech to lift your spirits when you're feeling low, or say it's not your fault when you royally screw up. From now on, if you step out of line, there are going to be consequences. So, if you think getting into people's head whenever you feel like it is normal, or even just acceptable, you better reconsider."

Wanda was stunned into silence.

Why? Why was everybody so cruel with her?

"Now, Wong will get you settled. The Committee is looking into finding you a therapist, and if said therapist ever manages to teach you to *not do whatever the hell you want, whenever you want and without giving a fuck about anything or anyone else*, I will teach you to get better control over your powers."

Wanda eyed him questioningly, but Strange just shrugged: "The Committee thinks that training and discipline would do you good. Maybe finally teach you about right and wrong. Frankly I don't see the point, it's pretty unlikely you'll ever walk free again, but they say prison sentences should not just be about punishing the criminals and keeping other people safe from them, but also about giving said criminals a chance to become better people. I'm pretty sure you've already had more than your fair share of chances, but whatever."

Wanda flinched. Strange just swirled his cape and walked off.

Wong addressed her next: "This way," he said simply, turning on his heels without even making sure Wanda was following.

He led her to a small room with a bed, a table and a small library. There was a window on the far wall, but Wanda knew trying to run away was futile. Judging by how Wong had managed to drop her effortlessly earlier, these people could easily overpower her in a matter of seconds if she were to
try anything.

And besides, what was there left for her outside these walls? She had lost everything.

She had lost Tony...

Not privy to her thoughts, Wong turned to her: "Breakfast will be delivered shortly," he grunted, "It should be superfluous to say that if you try to escape you will fail, but you have abundantly demonstrated how thick your head is, so I'm reminding you again."

Wanda couldn't come up with a retort fast enough, as the sorcerer promptly left the room.

She stared at the closed door for a few minutes, before turning to the inside of her new room.

Of her new cell.

A cell away from the place that had become her home. Away from what little good she had found in her life.

Away from him...

All she could feel in that moment was despair.

No, she wouldn't try to run, because she didn't have a place to run to anymore. Running would be pointless.

Everything was pointless.

***

Princess Shuri of Wakanda knew that, at some point in her life, she had been more nervous than she was now. Or at least, she could reasonably think so. But she couldn't quite pinpoint when that had occurred.

Not that it was surprising, all things considered: this time, the fate of her country was at stake.

In a few minutes, she would be faced with the task of persuading Tony Stark to cease and desist with the hostility towards her brother and her country.

Never before had a foreigner held so much power over Wakanda. Shuri's task was unprecedented in its importance, and also in the direness of the consequences should she fail.

The royal jet was granted permission to land at the Avengers Compound's Helipad number 6. As the pilot initiated the descent sequence, the Princess assessed the situation one last time.

As soon as she had called to schedule an appointment to discuss the very delicate matter of T'Challa's involvement with Steve Rogers and his team, Tony Stark had immediately agreed to meet her, in private and without a fuss. He could have refused, or made her wait, or dragged things out, but he hadn't. Shuri was not foolish enough to think that this would make things easier for her, but at the very least it showed some willingness from Stark to discuss the matter. Maybe, it meant that he was willing to at least listen to her.

However, earlier that morning, the Accords Committee had been informed about some sort of fracas involving Wanda Maximoff. Thanks to her position as a member of the Committee, Shuri had thus learned that the witch had tried - and failed - to escape detention the night before. She had just been transferred out of the Compound, not an hour before Shuri's arrival, and there hadn't been other
notifications to the Committee, so Shuri could safely assume that the relocation itself had gone off smoothly.

Or at least, she hoped so.

This attempted escape could be irrelevant, but she didn't know how it had affected Stark himself. At best, it had just been a small nuisance for him that wasn't going to affect his disposition for the upcoming meeting. At worst, it had angered him enough to completely erase his good will towards Shuri's pleas.

There was no way for Shuri to know what state of mind the man was going to be in. It was an unknown that could seriously lower her chances of accomplishing anything today.

She could only hope for the best.

The small jolt of the jet finally touching down meant the time for these assessments was over. She took a deep breath to center herself. She believed the American slang for moments like this was 'it's showtime'.

As she stepped out of the aircraft, she ordered the four Dora Milaje escorting her to stay in the jet. After all, T'Challa had brought them with him into the Compound, but what good did they do in the end? Miss Potts had thoroughly served him, bodyguards or not.

Friday was the one who received her: "Princess Shuri," she greeted professionally, "how was your flight?"

The question was cordial, but Friday's face was somewhat strained. Again, it probably had to do with Maximoff. From what little she could gather, Stark's daughter and the witch had not exactly been on friendly terms to begin with.

"It was pleasant, miss Stark, thank you," she simply replied, not giving anything away and not wanting to look like she was prying before even stepping into the Compound.

"Mr. Stark will receive you in his office," the young secretary said then, "if you would follow me..."

Friday turned and started leading the princess to Tony's office.

When she finally came face to face with the one and only Tony Stark, she felt a bit of uneasiness creeping down her spine.

His posture was strained, his face stern.

Not dissimilar to how Friday was earlier.

When he rose from his seat to greet her, he didn't smile.

"Princess Shuri. Please, take a seat," he said, extending his hand but not delving in any pleasantries.

Shuri shook his hand, bowing her head slightly in greeting, and sat down.

She didn't try to appear meek or submitted. She didn't try to fool him in any way. Stark was a man who appreciated sincerity and even bluntness in some occasions.

"So," the man started, sitting down and leaning forward, "I understand that you requested this meeting to discuss your brother's... involvement with former Captain Steve Rogers," he said, not in a friendly manner, but not overtly hostile either.
Shuri tilted her head: "In a way, yes. I have a proposal for you, Mr. Stark."

"Do tell," Tony prompted.

"As you know, Steve Rogers has been hiding in Wakanda for a period of time, along with his team. There is no point denying that now. I am told you have proof of that." Shuri responded, trying to be as cautious as possible.

"You'll have to forgive me, Princess, but with all due respect, Rogers wasn't simply in Wakanda. He was in your royal palace. Under your same roof," Tony retorted.

Shuri didn't flinch, continuing seriously: "That would be the case, yes. You have to understand, Mr. Stark, that the burden of the throne had just fell on my brother's shoulders, and that he was still mourning the loss of my father. He was under extreme duress when he made the decision of granting sanctuary to Rogers and the others."

At that, Tony deflated: "I do understand that, Princess. I myself have made some pretty rash decisions when confronted with the death of my parents..." he said, inviting her to continue.

Shuri smiled sadly: "My brother is a young king. Young and inexperienced. One thing that I find him struggling with is the ability to avoid falling back into a warrior's way of thinking when faced with political decisions. He is not only the King of Wakanda; he is also the Black Panther, Wakanda's warrior guide. It is difficult for him to bear all of this responsibility."

"I feel for your brother's plights, your Highness, but I still don't think they justify his actions," Tony interjected.

"They don't," Shuri agreed, "but he deserves the chance to try and be the good King he wants and strives to be. Which brings us back to the reason why I am here."

"You want me to forget about King T'Challa colluding with Rogers," Tony surmised bluntly.

"You're a businessman, Mr. Stark. I am merely offering to do business with you," Shuri countered, not letting Tony's words get to her.

Tony gave her an impressed look: "Very nice phrasing. Go on..."

Shuri smiled sadly again: "Ms Potts has been pretty straightforward with my brother: you are in possession of evidence of his... mistakes, shall we say. As I'm sure you can tell, going public with this evidence would not cause further damage to Rogers, or any of his followers. It would only damage my country, and my brother. His position as King would be severely undermined, and that is the last thing my country needs in this moment. Wakanda is transitioning out of an isolationism that has lasted for millennia, and not everyone is happy with such a radical change. There are plenty of people who'd rather we preserve the status quo. In this unstable situation, the consequences of such a scandal would be catastrophic, so for the sake of preventing a civil war that would tear my country apart... I want to buy that evidence. And I can offer payment in an extremely valuable currency."

"Vibranium," Tony guessed, "I figured that much."

"And are you willing to accept my proposal?" Shuri wanted to know.

Tony didn't answer immediately. It was a rather unique situation.

On one hand, Shuri was a very nice woman. She was wise and honest, two qualities that were extremely rare in a politician. Besides, she was just the messenger here. She was trying to remedy to
her brother's mistakes. Tony knew very well how it was like to 'take one for the team'. He didn't want to antagonize her, she absolutely didn't deserve it.

On the other hand, T'Challa had been an absolute moron and a total dick. He had only pursued his personal agenda, never giving a fuck about the Accords that his father had fought so hard for, or about the good of his country, that was supposed to be his primary concern. He deserved to get burned a little.

He had mixed feelings about this. Especially because T'Challa hadn't had the balls to get there and negotiate in person, sending Shuri instead. Maybe Pepper scared him a bit too much, he thought.

When all was said and done, however, Shuri had brought up a fair point: he definitely could not spark a civil war in a foreign country just to get back at T'Challa. He just couldn't.

"How much vibranium are we talking about?" he asked Shuri in the end.

She turned the question back to him: "How much do you think would be an appropriate amount?"

Tony shrugged: "I don't know? A ton?"

Shuri made a face: "Would you settle for five hundred kilograms?"

"How about a thousand kilograms?" Tony retorted.

"You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Stark," Shuri complimented, her tone and face a bit strained.

It crossed Tony's mind in that moment that he was coming off a bit like a greedy Westerner out to rob Wakanda of its goods. He had another idea, though: "Alright, let me sweeten the deal for you: I know that Wakanda is trying to get out of isolationism, and Stark Industries is one of the most globalized brands in the world. We can discuss future scientific and commercial partnerships between your country and my company, if you're interested." he proposed.

For the first time, Shuri was taken aback. She hadn't expected this.

She knew full well that Stark could just force her to give him his ton of vibranium if he wanted to. Instead, there he was extending an olive branch. And a pretty hefty olive branch too: with SI's help, Wakanda could really open itself to the world in a way that would take years, maybe decades, to achieve otherwise: "It is a very interesting proposal indeed, Mr. Stark. One that I will gladly accept." she said. She would be a fool not to take him up on such an offer.

Tony nodded, smiling: "Good. One ton of vibranium for King T'Challa's... dirty laundry, then?"

"We have a deal, Mr. Stark." Shuri agreed with a smile of her own.

It was in that moment that Friday's voice came from the phone on Tony's desk: "Boss? I'm sorry to interrupt your meeting, but Vision and Agent Carter are on their way back to the Compound. They will be landing shortly..."

The smile dropped from both Tony and Shuri's faces. "If you would excuse me, your Highness. Duty calls," he stated gravely.

"Of course," the princess replied, "we can discuss the details of our agreement at a later date. Thank you for your time, Mr. Stark," she said, rising from her seat and extending her hand.

Tony took it, standing up as well: "Always a pleasure, Princess Shuri."
"Likewise, Mr. Stark."

Tony watched her go. He didn't think T'Challa realized how lucky he was to have a sister like her.

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By the time Vision finally arrived at the small private airport that the rogue Avengers were using as a base of operations after being called in by the Wasp and Agent Thirteen, the fire from the two helicopters that the Winter Soldier had destroyed had already died down almost completely. Inside one of the warehouses, Vision had found a man and a woman, both unconscious, but otherwise unhurt. The man matched the description of former SHIELD Agent Liam Edwards, and the woman turned out to be an ex-SHIELD agent as well, one Bridget Leary.

As he searched the facility for the fugitives, Agent Thirteen made contact. She and the Wasp had been involved in a scuffle with the Winter Soldier. Barnes had escaped, but Ms. Van Dyne was in pursuit, and Hank Pym had been apprehended. There had also been two casualties, both associates of Edwards and Leary's.

However, Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson and Scott Lang were still nowhere to be found.

Vision and Sharon regrouped, before they returned to the Compound in the Avengers Quinjet with Edwards, Leary and Pym cuffed in the cargo hold.

They touched down just as the Wakandan royal jet was taking off from the adjacent helipad. Sharon briefly wondered how Tony's meeting with the Wakandan princess had gone, but then she remembered they had other things to worry about.

As they landed, they saw Tony approach the jet. As soon as the rear ramp was lowered, Tony stepped inside.

When he saw Tony, Hank immediately launched himself in a verbal assault: "Look at him, he thinks he's so cool! You think you've won, Stark? You will pay for this, I swear it!" he said.

Tony didn't even look his way: "What happened?" he asked instead, addressing Sharon.

"Hope and I arrived at the airport and found it on fire. Two helicopters had been blown up and there was a SHIELD Quinjet taking off. We decided to follow the aircraft and call Vision in to check the airport instead." Sharon answered.

"I arrived at the scene shortly thereafter and found Mr. Edwards and Ms. Leary in one of the buildings, unconscious," Vision supplied, pointing at the two. "Then Agent Carter called, informing me that she and Ms. Van Dyne had successfully captured Mr. Pym."

Hank scoffed and growled in his seat: "This is all your fault! You better watch your back, Stark!"

Again, he was completely ignored. Sharon resumed her report: "Apparently one of Pym's old contacts, an Oliver Caldwell, knew how to trigger the Winter Soldier. He betrayed Rogers and his minions and used Barnes to kidnap Pym, so he would have Pym particles to sell on the black market. He even killed one of his friends..."

Hearing this, Edwards and Leary froze: "Oliver killed Todd?" the woman asked.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Leary. I'm sorry," Sharon confirmed, giving the prisoner a sympathetic look.

Again, Hank seethed: "You idiots! You didn't even notice you had a traitor on your team all along!"
he shouted to his old coworkers.

"And you did?" Edwards sneered in response, shaking his head.

Tony, Sharon and Vision tuned them out: "So what happened then?" Tony asked.

"Hope and I intercepted Caldwell and Barnes," Sharon explained, "Caldwell's dead, but Barnes is still on the run, albeit with Hope on his tail."

"So Barnes is still in Russian Terminator mode?"

"In all probability, yes." Sharon mused.

"What about Rogers and the rest of his cronies?" Tony asked then.

"Rogers and the rest of his cronies are going to kick your sorry ass, Stark! You're nothing in front of Captain America!" Hank yelled, only to be once again completely ignored.

"They left the airport before I arrived," Vision said, "I can only assume they are searching for Barnes."

"Yeah, I think so too," Sharon agreed, "Rogers tends to go off the rails if he thinks his precious Bucky is in danger..."

Tony looked pensive for a moment: "That means Hope could be in danger too... Rogers won't think twice to go through her to get to Barnes..."

"She deserves it!" Hank screeched, "That bitch needs a lesson!"

"Can one of you put a gag on him or something?" Leary asked the Avengers.

"We need to go," Tony decided, "If Rogers finds Barnes, Hope is gonna need backup. Get ready guys, we take off immediately. This could be where we put an end to Rogers' fuck-ups."

Hank again bristled: "So you're gonna hide behind your friends, huh? You don't have the balls to face Cap on your own, do you!? You're a coward, Stark!"

"What do we do with these guys?" Sharon asked, finally giving Hank some attention.

Tony smiled, beckoning towards the ramp of the jet with his head. As he did that, Isaiah Bradley, the US Sokovia Accords representative, entered the aircraft followed by several men wearing an FBI badge.

"All yours, Delegate Bradley," Tony smiled, "You might wanna gag that one, he's pretty loud," he said, pointing to Hank while winking to Leary.

"Fuck you, Stark!" Hank yelled. Despite the situation she was in, Leary smiled back to Tony.

"Thank you for the advice, Mr. Stark. And great job, to you and the Avengers," Bradley complimented, as his men approached the three prisoners and started reading them their rights.

"Thanks, Bradley. Hopefully by the end of the day we'll get some more results," Tony smiled.

As Pym was manhandled out of the jet, he was spewing insults, threats and accusations left and right. In much the same predicament, Edwards and Leary were silent, and only had an overwhelmed and grave expression adorning their faces. But Edwards also looked oddly determined.
He called Tony: "Hey, Stark?"

Tony turned to him.

"Kick that star-spangled bastard's ass," he said.

Tony just smiled at him as Edwards was forced out of the plane.

***

Bucky - or was he the Winter Soldier? He didn't even know anymore, in his frazzled and precarious state of mind - had walked all night and morning. He was now in the outskirts of Philadelphia.

To his left, on the other side of the road, was a small diner.

It was open. There were some people inside having breakfast.

He scowled at the people inside the windows with a murderous expression for a good five minutes, trying to figure out if this was a good idea.

The other guys were not enemies... Steve had said they were not enemies...

Maybe they could help...

No...

He couldn't be sure...

There was no guarantee that they wouldn't try and put him back on the chair... He was not going back on the chair!

He needed some leverage.

He walked resolutely up to the diner and entered. The soft clinking of the doorbell as he pushed the door open nearly made him jump out of his skin.

Shrunken down and unseen, the Wasp flew inside the diner right behind him.

An attractive blonde waitress greeted him with a smile as he approached the counter: "Hello," she chirped. Then, her smile was replaced by a worried and confused expression when he didn't speak and just scowled at her.

A cook approached them, wiping his hands on a towel. He had the same confused expression as the waitress: "You ok, man?" he asked.

Bucky pulled out his gun and shot once at the ceiling.

Hell broke loose. Customers and waiters screamed in terror, some rushing chaotically for the exit, others cowering under the tables. The waitress and cook on the other side of the counter froze in absolute fear.

Wasp grimaced, recovering from the initial shock. She quickly pondered her options: having been shrunken down all night, she was almost out of particles. She couldn't attack Barnes now, not with these people trapped inside the diner.

She cursed, activating her comm: "Guys, this is getting ugly. Barnes is unhinged, he's just sieged a
diner, we have multiple hostages. Converge on my position immediately. And hurry up, I'm running low on particles," she said.

Not having heard Wasp's call for backup, Bucky lowered his gun, pointing it at the poor waitress who had backed herself against the far wall behind the counter and was now looking at him like a deer caught in headlights: "Please... please, don't shoot me! We've only just started the day, the cash register is almost empty! We only have... Oh God, please, no..." she blabbed incoherently.

"I am the Winter Soldier," Barnes growled, making her eyes bulge in fear even more, "and I want to speak with Tony Stark."

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, we'll see what Steve, Sam and Scott are up to. And what the Avengers will do about it ;-).
Down in flames

Chapter Summary

The Avengers deal with the Winter Soldier. And with the remaining fugitives.

Chapter Notes

So, Steve and co. have been running around causing troubles for twenty-eight chapters. Let's fix that, shall we?

Steve was pacing up and down the side of the empty road like a caged animal. From inside their beat-up van, Sam and Scott were regarding him with worried glances.

When Bucky had kidnapped Hank, to cover his escape he had also destroyed the two helicopters that Edwards and his team had at their disposal, and had stolen the Quinjet. He had done a good job, making sure that Steve and the others couldn't follow him.

That had left Steve with only one option: he had had to take a car.

Acting only on instinct and desperation while Bucky's Quinjet disappeared in the distance, he had run outside, looking for anything he could use.

There were two old vans and a pickup truck left at the airport in that moment, since Edwards' SUV was missing along with his two friends. One of the vans had been caught by the flames of the burning helicopters, and the pickup truck meant that they would have had to put Sam and Scott's not really inconspicuous gear in plain sight in the flatbed. So Steve had herded a still dazed Sam in the remaining van, then he had gone back to retrieve Scott and their gear. He had unceremoniously thrown both the still unconscious man and all their equipment in the back of the van and had driven off as fast as he could in the direction the Quinjet had taken.

He had driven all night, probably hoping to find Bucky just with his instinct and hope. Sam had tried to tell him it wouldn't work, that Bucky could be anywhere at this point, but Steve didn't listen. When Sam had insisted, Steve had harshly told him to shut up.

A while later, Scott woke up too. He asked what was going on, but Steve was too shaken to answer him. It was Sam who told him what had happened, in soft, carefully chosen words, mindful of not angering Steve further. In the back of his mind, Steve felt both grateful for Sam's tact and sorry for yelling at him, but he didn't say anything. He was too focused on Bucky.

When Sam was done bringing him up to speed, Scott panicked: "Oh God, Hank... We have to find them!" he exclaimed, eyes slightly unfocused, "If Barnes kidnapped Hank, he might hurt him-"

He had just said the wrong thing at the wrong moment. Steve stomped on the brake pedal with both feet. When the van came to a stop, he turned to Scott: "What did you just say!?" he barked, glaring
Scott stuttered, scared by the outburst: "L... I mean, I wasn't trying to say... It's just... Look, if they used Barnes to kidnap Hank, they might use him to-

"Exactly," Steve interrupted him, "they used him. He's not in his right mind. That's not Bucky, that's the Winter Soldier! Is that clear!?"

Scott withdrew even more: "I'm sorry, Cap... It's just... Hank is in danger, and he's been like a mentor to me, and... I didn't mean to say-"

"Bucky is in danger too!" Steve snapped, "so don't you dare badmouth him and try to justify yourself saying you're confused because someone you care for is in danger! I'm in your exact same situation, don't you forget it!" he yelled.

Scott backpedaled almost to the back doors of the van, cowering under Steve's gaze. The supersoldier glared at him a few moments more before slowly turning around and getting the van to move again.

A good ten minutes passed in absolute silence before Scott tentatively came forward again: "Jeez, man... I'm sorry... Please, don't be mad at me, I'm still new to this gig..." he said in the end, putting a hand on Steve's shoulder.

Steve didn't even acknowledge him.

Hours later, at the crack of dawn, Steve had finally admitted defeat and pulled over at the side of a secondary and deserted road, shaken, frustrated and enraged at whoever had done this to bucky yet again.

He got out of the van and started pacing. He still couldn't wrap his head around it.

What the heck had happened? How had they triggered the Winter Soldier again? And most importantly, where were they?

For the umpteenth time, he tried to take a deep breath and assess the situation once again.

Edwards had gone ballistic moments before Bucky's attack, saying that two of his teammates were missing along with Bucky. Maybe Steve should have brought him along instead of just taking Sam and Scott. He could have had some ideas on how to find his friends.

Because if that was really the Winter Soldier that had attacked them, then it was clear that Caldwell and Sutherland were the ones who had triggered him.

*Those bastards were Hydra.*

And maybe Edwards and Leary were too.

Steve returned to the van half thinking of going back to the airport and see if Edwards and Leary were still there. If they really were Hydra, they were gonna face the wrath of Captain America. He was not going to have the wool pulled over his face by some Nazi scum again.

But then the radio spoke.

"Breaking news: the infamous Hydra assassin known as the Winter Soldier, who had gone into hiding in the wake of the Avengers Civil War, has abruptly resurfaced today in the city of
Philadelphia, sieging a diner and taking eight people hostage."

Steve felt the blood run cold in his veins. He stared at the radio in horror, jerkily turning up the volume.

The announcer kept talking in a calm voice: "Our correspondent, Mitch Watkins, has just arrived on the scene. Mitch?"

"Yes, Clay," a new voice spoke, "the police is obviously already on site and is evacuating the area. Both the Avengers and the military have been alerted, although for now, the intentions of the Winter Soldier remain unknown."

Steve felt his throat close up at the mention of the Avengers being called in.

*Are they insane!? Tony tried to kill Bucky in Siberia! What are they thinking, calling him to arrest Bucky!?*

"Can you see the diner?" they heard the announcer ask.

"I can't," the guy called Mitch answered, "everybody has been asked to move away to a pretty considerable distance. The police has cleared an area of four blocks to allow the Avengers room to move-"

Steve started the engine. Sam and Scott were saying something, but he didn't hear a single word. The tires of the van screeched as he floored the accelerator towards Philadelphia.

***

Tony eyed Friday's armor curiously as they boarded the Quinjet: "Is that a new suit?" he asked.

"Yep. Lady Iron Mark 2," Friday replied airily, "I've codenamed it 'Stinger'."

"Stinger? Like the missile?"

Friday gave him a look: "Not exactly. It's a surprise," she said simply.

Tony didn't question her further while he got into his own, dark blue armor. This could be where 'Sweet Revenge' really earned its name.

As they boarded the jet, where Sharon and Vision were waiting for them, Tony grew serious: "Sit rep," he asked.

"Barnes has moved to the kitchen of the diner with all the hostages. No windows, two doors in: one from the diner itself and one from the back alley," Sharon reported, "Hope is in the room and in radio contact, but she's low on particles. She thinks she can hold position for another twenty to twenty-five minutes, maximum."

"What's our ETA?" Tony asked.

"About ten minutes," Sharon answered.

"Good. Tell Hope to disengage as soon as we arrive," Tony ordered.

"Are you sure? We have time to attack before she runs out.... If she disengages we lose our eyes and ears on Barnes," Sharon pointed out.
"We'll use the infrared scanners if we have to. I won't risk Hope running out of particles and growing to full size out of nowhere in front of an already spooked Winter Soldier," Tony replied, "How many hostages?"

"Eight," Sharon replied without pushing the argument further, "the cook, a waitress and six customers."

"I think it goes without saying that they are our priority," Tony said, taking a deep breath, "Friday, I'm going to send you in first. He asked to speak with me, but I don't trust myself not to shoot his head off as soon as I see his ugly mug. And with hostages around, it might get messy."

Friday nodded gravely.

***

As the Quinjet took off, two women watched it leave from the tarmac.

"Be careful, Tony," Pepper whispered.

Natasha lowered her gaze: "I never thought I would be in this situation, you know?" she told Pepper, "waiting helplessly at home hoping for my friends to come back in one piece..."

Pepper kept staring at the sky as the Quinjet disappeared in the distance, seemingly so lost in thought that Natasha became unsure if she had heard her.

Despite all the months that had passed, Pepper and Natasha still hadn't cleared the air between them after the Civil War. Partly because they were rarely in the same areas of the Compound, despite both of them living in it, and partly because they had been avoiding each other to some extent.

Finally, Pepper spoke: "It's hard," she agreed, "even more so because there is simply nothing I can do. But Tony... being Iron Man is what he is. It's like he's born for it, and I've come to accept that I can't change that. And Friday... she's her father's daughter, through and through. But they have each other's back, that makes me feel a little bit better. Knowing they can count on each other and on their team."

At Pepper's jab, Natasha turned to look at her feet. She was expecting some harshness from the other redhead, not that it wasn't undeserved. All that was happening, it was because she had stabbed Tony in the back in Germany. She only had herself to blame for her current predicament.

"They make a very good team," she said in the end with a small voice, "much better that the old one."

Pepper took that phrase for what it was: an apology. An acknowledgement of how this new team was doing right by Tony where the original Avengers never had. She didn't answer, but she nodded, acknowledging the apology.

Natasha felt a tiny bit better as they finally headed back inside to join Rhodey, who was already monitoring the mission from the base.

***

It had been just forty-two minutes since the Winter Soldier had holed himself up in the diner with his hostages. The police had already formed a perimeter, four blocks around the diner, so that the Avengers could fight without the risk of causing casualties. There was quite a big crew forming around the area, but on the inside of the police's barricade, the scenery was that of a post-apocalyptic
ghost city. Not a single person could be seen on the streets, or inside the buildings.

Sharon landed the jet in a parking lot right in front of the diner Barnes was in. The Quinjet was a stealth plane, so silent that there was a good chance he hadn't heard them coming, and with the kitchen having no windows, he couldn't have seen them either.

They were also far enough away from the safety perimeter that the massive crowd of onlookers would most likely not be able to see what was going on.

As the ramp lowered and they all disembarked, Hope grew to full size right in front of them: "Thank God, just in time," she said, "I was really running out of juice back there..."

Friday, already clad in her armor, smirked in response: "I've brought you some extra fuel," she said, holding up a sophisticated looking briefcase. Hope took it and opened it, revealing six vials of Pym Particles.

As soon as Hope had equipped the particles on the regularor in the belt of her suit, Tony immediately took command: "Alright, let's get this show on the road. Friday, it's your turn. Keep the comms open at all times when you go in. And be careful, baby girl," he recommended.

Friday only nodded once, before turning on her heels and heading for the diner.

Her helmet came up right before she entered. From there, she moved towards the kitchen.

"James Barnes!" she called as she arrived at the door.

Nobody answered.

When Friday tried the door, she found it unlocked. She pushed it open to reveal what her infrared scanners were already showing her: Barnes was in the center of the room, holding a terrified waitress in front of him as a human shield, his metal arm around her neck and a gun pointed to her temple. The other hostages were sitting against the right wall, cowering in fear.

Friday held her hand up, pointing the repulsor at Barnes, as her suit scanned him looking for the best way to neutralize the threat. She felt anger surging through her as she came face to face with the Winter Soldier for the very first time.

This was the man for which Rogers had caused all the Civil War circus. This was the man that helped nearly kill Boss in Siberia.

This was the man who had killed Boss' parents. Her own grandparents.

Boss had sent her in first because he didn't trust himself not to hurt him - or worse - as soon as he saw him. Friday understood his concern a lot better now. Maybe some of it was residual anger from stopping Wanda's plans not seven hours earlier, but in that moment, she herself wanted to ram her armored fist through his teeth.

She was distracted from her violent fantasies by one of the hostages, a little girl who was sitting against the wall next to her mother. The girl pointed excitedly at her: "Mommy, look! Lady Iron! This bad man is done for!" she exclaimed excited.

Barnes growled, unsettled by the girl's statement. The waitress in his clutches let out a scared whine as tears started running down her face.

Friday tried to calm her first: "What's your name, miss?" she asked the poor waitress, nodding in her
"C-Carly," the girl managed to answer.

"Don't worry, Carly. He's not gonna hurt you," Friday assured her, "right, Barnes?"

The soldier was losing his patience: "I asked to speak with Tony Stark," he growled, "who the hell are you!?"

"Are you deaf or something? One of your hostages just called me Lady Iron," Friday deadpanned, "But since you're probably looking for a more thorough answer..."

Friday let her helmet retract and collapse into her suit, revealing her face: "My name is Friday Ana Stark. I am Tony Stark's daughter."

Both Barnes and the hostages stared at her as if she had grown a second head. Over the comms, the Avengers made various exclamations of surprise: Friday's identity was a secret, and she had just casually revealed it!

Tony, however, sounded amused: "You sure are, baby girl," he said.

Among the hostages, the little girl whispered: "Iron Man's daughter! That is so cool! I can't wait to tell my friends!"

Friday glanced her way and winked at her, smiling for a moment before going serious again as her gaze went back on Barnes. Despite having appeared without her helmet on every possible newspaper, television channel and social media on Earth not too long ago, her true identity was still a secret. But she reckoned it would be a good way to throw Barnes off his game right now. Boss must have figured that too, judging by his reaction.

Barnes had killed two members of her family. He had nearly killed Boss too. She fully intended to get back at him in every way she could think of.

Barnes tried to recover: "I want to speak with your father," he repeated, "Bring him here!"

"My father doesn't give a damn about what you want, and taking a few hostages is not going to make him more inclined to speak with you," Friday growled back at him, "But you have his attention. He's outside, waiting with the rest of the Avengers. If you want to talk to him, all you have to do is release the hostages and surrender."

"We both know that's not gonna happen," Barnes seethed, "so cut the crap, honey. Get Stark here! Now!"

"Or else what? You're gonna shoot her?" Friday asked calmly, nodding towards the waitress, Carly. "Let me tell you how that would work out: my suit is designed to have instantaneous reaction times. As soon as I see your finger start to tighten on the trigger, I will target your throat with a repulsor blast strong enough to cut all the way through your neck and sever your spinal cord. It won't matter how fast you can pull that trigger, I am faster. Supersoldier or not, you will be dead from the neck down before ever managing to shoot that gun," Friday threatened, her voice and facial expression showing that she meant every single word, "Then I will ask Carly here to bring me an Earl Grey while we wait for the proper authorities to come and collect your corpse. Nobody else will die today. Only you."

Barnes didn't answer, clearly stunned. Friday's face darkened even more as she narrowed her eyes ominously: "Now, let the hostages go and surrender. I won't ask nicely again."
Barnes was clearly scared. His gun was wavering and his stance was getting sloppier. He tried to cover himself better with the human shield represented by Carly, but obtained the opposite result.

Then Friday's helmet unfolded back out of the armor, wrapping her head, and her hand repulsor charged. Hearing the familiar, dreaded whine of Iron Man's signature weapon charging up, Barnes lost it.

In a mad rush of panic, he tried to point his gun at Friday. The girl reacted instantly, as she had promised she would, only in a less lethal way.

A small compartment opened up on her shoulder and fired a small tranquillizer dart at Barnes' hand, the one holding the gun. It struck the nerve, and the gun immediately fell from his hand. At the same time, Friday shot her repulsor clean through his left shoulder, destroying all the wiring connecting the bionic arm to the nerves of the stump.

Carly let out a scared yelp, but Bucky was already stumbling back, completely stunned. His left, metal arm had fallen limp at his side, and while the tranquillizer wasn't strong enough to drop him, he already couldn't feel his right hand anymore.

Scared probably more than Carly was, he cradled his right arm against his chest as he tried to regroup and find a way counterattack. But Lady Iron was on him immediately, pressing her advantage.

She punched him so hard in the face that she broke his nose, then she grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the far wall.

"Everybody out!" Friday shouted to the hostages. They took less than ten seconds to flee the room. The little girl cheered "Go, Lady Iron!" she exclaimed as she was ushered out by her mother.

Bucky tried to kick her legs out from under her, but Friday sidestepped him and took off, lifting them both about a foot in the air, before she charged the repulsor around his throat: "Do that again, and I will take your head off. I mean it, Barnes. Don't try me."

The Winter Soldier's eyes darted frantically in every direction, trying to find something, some way to extricate himself. But there was no way out.

He was defeated.

His eyes started welling up with tears: "Please... Please, don't put me back in the chair... Please, I'm sorry... Oh God, I'm so sorry... Please..."

Friday knew what he was talking about. The chair was a torture device Hydra had used to indoctrinate him.

Barnes was delirious. He probably thought she was one of his handlers.

There was no point dragging this on. Still holding him by the throat, she shot four more tranq darts on his chest and made him lose consciousness, finally putting him out of his misery.

***

"Any update on the situation, Mitch?" Steve heard the broadcaster ask over the radio.

"None, Clay," the correspondent answered, "we've seen the Avengers jet arrive on the scene approximately ten minutes ago, but so far we haven't seen any movement... Hold on, I'm getting something..."
Steve's heart was in his throat, and beating a mile a minute. The anguish he felt in that moment was physically painful.

Mitch’s voice came up again: "Yes, so, I'm being confirmed that all the hostages have been freed and are being currently tended to by the police and paramedics, though none of them appears to be hurt. We still have no information about the Winter... Wait, Clay, something else is happening, there's a van charging towards... Oh my God!"

Steve was in sight of the police barricade now. He slammed his foot down on the accelerator, aiming for a spot where the crowd was spread out more thinly. People ran out of the way as he crashed against the back of a police car, ramming it out of the way and powering through the blockade.

The radio was still blaring with the reporter's voice: "Clay, this is unbelievable! An old van has just smashed through the perimeter set by the police! I can't believe what I'm seeing!"

"Is anyone hurt?" the broadcaster asked worriedly.

"No, not that I can see... Clay, this is complete chaos! I'm not sure what-"

Steve punched the radio on the dashboard, shattering it with a single blow, as he drove on. But the van had taken a serious hit: the front bumper was dragging against the tarmac on the right side where the van had hit the police car, he right headlight, the front grille and most importantly the radiator had been completely smashed by the impact.

The van exhaled its last breath a few hundred yards into the red zone. Steve turned to his companions, without noticing their scared and completely flustered expressions: "We need to find Bucky and get the hell outta here," he barked, "watch out for the Avengers, don't engage unless it's absolutely necessary! Sam, take to the skies! I want eyes in the air! Scott, we need a diversion! Go!"

he said. Then, without even waiting for them to acknowledge him, he pushed the driver door open, so hard that it tore clean off its hinges and landed a few feet away, on the sidewalk.

Scott jumped out from the back of the van, almost scared of not being fast enough in carrying out his orders. Sam on the other hand, hesitated for a good half minute, looking down at his shoes with a hard, thoughtful expression on his face, before taking a deep breath and finally getting out of the destroyed van.

This was not what he had signed up for. Steve was... He was slipping.

They were supposed to help people, not nearly running them over with a van to save one person.

He leisurely put on his winged jetpack and took off. He spotted the Avengers Quinjet almost immediately.

For the first time in a long time, he knew what he had to do.

***

It was obvious that the Avengers had been notified of the breech in the perimeter as soon as it had happened. When Sam landed in front of them, he wasn't surprised to find them ready to meet him.

Stark had a hand raised and pointed at him, repulsor already charged. Steve's girl (Huh. Steve's girl was with the Avengers. She must have come to his same realization, only much earlier than him) had two guns drawn and pointed at him too. The Wasp was glaring at him, her forearms crackling with electricity. Vision was floating threateningly about a foot off the ground. They had probably guessed who was in the van.
"Sam, what's the situation? Sam? Sam, come in!" came Steve's voice in his earpiece. Sam took it off and stomped down on it, crushing it completely and grinding his foot on it viciously.

"I surrender," was all he said, folding his wings back into the suit, raising his hands and getting down on his knees.

The Avengers did not lower their weapons for a long moment, then Vision spoke: "This is the first wise decision I've seen you make, Mr. Wilson," he said, walking up to him and helping him up before cuffing his hands behind his back.

"Where's Rogers, Sam?" Tony asked.

"He's here. We just barged through the perimeter. He wants to find Bucky," Sam answered without raising his eyes to meet Tony's.

"Well then, that means we don't have to go looking for him," a new voice piped up. Sam turned towards it, and saw Lady Iron walk calmly towards the group, dragging an unconscious Bucky by the scruff. "He'll come to us," the girl added.

Sam didn't say anything. Honestly, he wasn't surprised the Avengers had already handled the Winter Soldier.

He was escorted to the Quinjet and secured to a seat next to the rear ramp. Bucky was put on the seat opposite to him on the other side of the plane, only he was tied to it with heavy duty manacles.

Tony walked up to the ramp: "What about the other idiot, Lang?" he asked Sam. "Is he here too?"

As if on cue, before Sam could answer, Scott grew to giant size approximately a block away. From his vantage inside the Quinjet, Sam could only partially see him, but Scott looked around for a moment and then evidently spotted the Avengers' aircraft.

"Ah, there you are!" they heard Scott say, as the gargantuan renegade started slowly walking towards them.

Tony turned back to Sam, absolutely unimpressed: "Never mind. We found him," he deadpanned, "Sharon, watch them. We're going to take care of this idiot, real quick."

Sharon hummed in agreement, getting into the jet and closing the ramp for safety.

***

Outside, Tony watched Lang slowly come forward. Seriously, didn't this guy realize that when he was giant he moved like a beached whale? There was way too much mass to manage any agile movement.

It was Friday who spoke next: "I believe this is the perfect opportunity to see if we did a good job on our gear, wouldn't you say, Hope?" she asked.

"Oh, absolutely," Wasp answered, "I've been waiting for this exact moment for quite a while."

"Um... what are you up to, ladies?" Tony asked, perplexed by the impromptu exchange.

Friday smiled at him and turned to Hope: "Shall we?" she smiled, lifting her right arm as a piece of plating on her armor's vambrace opened up, revealing some sort of miniaturized rail catapult, similar to those used on aircraft carriers to launch jet fighters. Hope smiled back before shrinking down and
landing on the small metal contraption.

"Hope and I have been working together on our gear recently," Friday said casually to Tony and Vision, who were slightly taken aback by the sudden development.

Tony was pretty surprised. Then he finally made the connection: "Oooh, Stinger!" he exclaimed.

"Stinger?" asked Vision.

"My new armour," Friday supplied, "It's codenamed 'Stinger'.'"

"Because it's designed to work in tandem with the Wasp, who has electric stingers! Clever!" Tony chimed.

Friday's smile grew wider: "I've had to sacrifice one of the forearm missile launchers, but I think it's worth it," she explained.

Tony inclined his head in agreement. When Barton had shot Lang inside his armor at Leipzig, for a moment Tony hadn't gotten a clue of what was going on. Then when he and Hope had fought Barton and Maximoff in San Francisco, the witch hadn't even had the time to realize what had hit her before dropping. Hope and Friday had had a very good idea, refining the technique.

A light jolt of the ground brought his attention back to the advancing giant. At this point he was so close that every step he took, he made the ground shake like a T-rex from Jurassic Park.

He turned to Friday: "Do you need a diversion?"

"It wouldn't hurt," Friday confirmed.

"Vision, let's go," Tony ordered then.

As Iron Man and Vision engaged Giant Man, Friday took off and landed on a rooftop just to her left. Giant Man was trying to swat his assailants like mosquitoes, but he was laughably slow. He would never be able to catch them. Still, it would probably be best to stop him before he stepped on a parked car or, worse, a nearby house.

She raised her arm and aimed for Lang's belt, where the particle regulator was: "You ready, Tinkerbell?" she asked Hope.

"Born ready, Leeloo," Hope answered.

Tony and Vision managed to maneuver Lang so he was facing her, giving her a clean shot: "Let's see how you like it when somebody gets in your suit," Friday seethed, releasing the catapult.

Hope was propelled towards the target at a speed she would never be able to achieve using her own suit's propulsion system. She had enough momentum to punch through the metallic casing of the regulator and get to the mechanisms inside.

Two seconds later, Scott shrank back to his normal size.

"What?" he squeaked, pushing the buttons on his hands frantically, as if that would somehow jumpstart his suit.

Hope grew back to her normal size right in front of him a moment later: "Hi, Scott," she greeted casually. One after the other the Avengers landed around him.
Now Lang was scared: "W-wait... I-" he stumbled, jerking his head around looking at each of his opponents.

"Bye, Scott," Hope added, before electrocuting him with her stingers. He seized for a good five seconds before dropping to the ground, still twitching a little. Hope was quick to grab Scott's broken regulator and yank it off his belt, together with his reservoir of particles.

"Pathetic moron," she hissed to herself, before turning to her team: "Ok, he's disarmed."

"It works, doesn't it?" Friday considered, showing her forearm to Hope.

"Flawlessly," Hope agreed, smiling.

"Bitchin'. Three down," Tony replied lightly, but then his face darkened as he turned towards the Quinjet behind him, "only one to go."

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Steve's hands were shaking.

He could feel so much adrenaline pumping through his veins that in the back of his mind, he briefly wondered if he could have a heart attack despite the serum.

Sam and Scott were not answering to the comms. Had they been captured too?

He could barely think straight. He was scared, angry, desperate...

He couldn't think about Sam and Scott right now. He had to deal with one problem at a time. First, he had to find Bucky.

He had to find Bucky. He needed to.

He flattened himself against a wall and peeked his head over the corner. The Avengers Quinjet was there, ramp closed. Nobody seemed to be around.

"Looking for someone?" a voice behind him said, making Steve nearly jump out of his skin. So much for nobody being around.

He turned so fast his neck hurt. Tony's new female sidekick was there. Iron Maiden, or something like that.

He didn't have time to waste. If she was there, Tony could not be far behind. He had to move fast: "Where's Bucky? What did you do to him!??"

"You know, I couldn't help but notice how you asked about Barnes, but you can't be bothered to ask about Lang and Wilson," another voice came from behind him.

Again, Steve's head jerked in the opposite direction: Hank's traitorous daughter, Wasp, was there. Through his increasing fear of being stalled long enough for Iron Man to arrive, Steve scowled at her: "And I couldn't help but notice that you didn't answer my question..."

"Sargeant Barnes has been apprehended," yet another voice said. Vision landed gracefully to his right: "He's in the Quinjet, restrained and unconscious, along with your two teammates, Mr. Rogers."

Steve felt the urge to correct him, saying 'Captain Rogers', but he didn't say anything. He had to find a way to get to that jet and get his friends out. God, he had to move...
"I know what you're thinking," the Iron girl said, "Maybe if I make a run for it, I have a chance. Let me tell you: you really don't. It's over, Rogers. You'd better surrender now, before-

She cut herself off as Iron Man landed in a crouch right in front of Steve.

"Oops. Too late," the girl cackled.

Steve was frozen by fear.

Tony's suit was different from his previous armors: it was painted a dark, metallic blue, with a silver faceplate and silver stripes on his chest and shoulders. It resembled his own, stealth uniform from his days at SHIELD, and Steve had no doubt that Tony had built that suit specifically to fight against him. But the most ominous part was the light of the various reactors and eye slits on it: instead of the usual light blue, they were glowing a fiery, dangerous orange.

That thing looked mean.

"Tony," Steve tried, but Tony didn't seem to be in a talking mood, as he straightened up and started walking menacingly up to him.

But Steve would not be intimidated (who was he kidding, he was trembling like a leaf and just about to wet himself in fear), as he drew back into a fighting stance and activated his magnetic shield.

He never stood a chance.

Tony was unbelievably fast, and monstrously powerful. In two minutes flat, Steve was on the ground, bleeding from his mouth and nose, his left forearm fractured where Tony had crushed the gauntlet with the mag-shield around it, disabling his only defensive weapon.

At this point Steve was absolutely panicking, but he slowly and shakily got to his feet. Tony was standing in front of him, silent and completely unfazed. His suit didn't even have a single chip in the paint.

Despite everything, Steve felt a surge of anger: "You think you're so tough!?" he yelled, "You would be nothing without that suit!"

That caused a reaction that Steve would never have expected: Tony stood silent a few moments more, then his armor opened and he stepped out of it. He didn't say anything, just staring at him with an expression of pure rage etched on his features.

Steve was sure that one of the blows he'd taken had somehow addled his brain. He knew he wasn't thinking straight, because he was clearly hallucinating. Tony's eyes were glowing orange like the reactors and eyes of his suit.

In another occasion he would never have hit Tony out of his suit, but in that moment, Tony was probably thinking he had weakened him enough that he could take him on even out of the armor.

Steve felt his panic be replaced by anger. *I'll show you, rich boy!*

He swung his punch right at Tony's face. It was probably enough to kill him, but Steve didn't care.

Tony caught it.

*He caught it!*

Steve stared incredulously, as Tony retaliated with a punch of his own, strong enough to send Steve
flying against a wall twenty feet behind him.

What!?

Tony walked up to him. Again, Steve tried to attack, and again, Tony parried him effortlessly. Then, it was over.

Steve reeled in absolute shock, and Tony started to veritably smash him with a barrage of blows, each hitting him so hard that the wall behind him was starting to crack. Then, with a final punch to the face, the wall finally gave, and Steve found himself looking at a ceiling just inside a room, covered in bits of bricks and cement mortar.

"Look at you, buster," Tony sneered. Steve painfully managed to raise his head and look at him through the breech in the wall, his expression absolutely gobsmacked. What just happened!?

Tony shook his head and turned around: "Get him," he ordered to his team, walking away.

Vision and the Iron dame moved forward towards him. Oh God... This is it...

Desperate and blind with rage and anguish, Steve tried one last time to struggle against them as they hoisted him up, but the girl was having none of it. Her armored punch hit his temple with the force of a battering ram.

Steve's world went black.

Chapter End Notes

So, this story is coming to an end. There are probably going to be another three to five chapters before we wrap it up, but I hope to start working on some unconnected one-shots very soon, before I start out on my first multi-chaptered sequel. Tony's Girl is coming to an end, but Starks and Irons is just starting as a series!
Heroes and criminals

Chapter Summary

Team Iron Man claims the spoils.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone. I'm terribly sorry for the massive delay, but real life is being a bitch. I'll try to be more on time from now on. At the very least, I can promise to NOT make you wait an entire month without updating ^^'.

Meanwhile, hoping to make it up to you all, this is the longest chapter I've written to date! I hope you'll enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Steve came to his senses, he found himself tied up to a seat of the Quinjet with heavy duty manacles he couldn't possibly hope to break.

He was scared. And for quite a lot of different reasons.

He was scared for Bucky, who was sitting across from him, tied with the same oversized restraints, and still unconscious. For a dreadful moment Steve had feared the worst, before noticing the stable rise and fall of his chest, indicating he was still breathing.

Tony had taken Bucky alive. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad news.

He was scared for Sam, who was tied to the seat right next to his. They had used normal cuffs on him, but they were more than enough to keep an unenhanced man at bay. Sam's expression was weirdly serene, although for some reason he was stubbornly refusing to turn and face Steve. The supersoldier couldn't understand why.

He was scared for Scott, who was practically panicking in his seat, next to Bucky: he was there, breathing heavily, his eyes wild and moist with unshed tears. He had tried speaking with Van Dyne, to ask about Hank, but the woman had just sent him a withering glare that had effectively shut him up.

Hope Van Dyne was another reason Steve was scared: this woman had turned her back to her own father, joining Tony instead. Now she was just standing there, admiring her handiwork without a single hint of regret. Was she really okay with what was happening?

She was clearly pissed, yet she looked perfectly poised. Her demeanor reminded Steve a bit of Natasha.

God knew where Nat was. Steve was worried about her too.

Another thing that scared him was how neither Tony nor his sidekick girl had taken off their armors.
Just like Van Dyne, they were standing there, helmets off but clearly ready to fight at any moment, scowling at them, him and Bucky specifically.

Vision was there too, and while his expression not as hard as those of his teammates, it was serious enough that Steve knew if he tried anything, the android wouldn't hesitate to counterattack.

Then there were all sorts of other worries. Clint and Wanda, for example: where were they? What had Tony done to them?

What had he done to Hank Pym?

How could he not understand, not see what he was doing, working with these politicians and paper-pushers?

But the thing that scared him the most, that absolutely terrified him, was that now Tony had won and they had lost. They were completely at his mercy.

Tony had even defeated him in combat, and he had ultimately done so without even using the suit. He had enhanced himself, somehow.

Steve couldn't believe that Tony had been so petty as to come up with a way to become physically stronger just to defeat him. But, pettiness or not, the fact remained that he had won. If he was truly so angry that he had gone as far as to enhance himself in order to defeat and capture them, there was no telling what he would do now that he had done so.

Siberia came back to Steve's mind: Tony's expression in the final moment, the utter, absolute, unyielding rage on his face... that was the stuff of nightmares. Steve knew he would never be able to forget it.

And now...

Now Tony had all the power, and they had none.

It shook Steve to the bone just to think what he was plotting.

Finally, the jet started its descent. Less than a minute later, they landed and the rear ramp started to be lowered. As Van Dyne uncuffed his ankles from the jet seat, Steve casually glanced in the direction of the cockpit. He hadn't bothered to look in the direction of the cockpit during the flight, but now he could see who had flown them back to the Avengers Compound, as the pilot joined the Avengers in the rear of the plane.

And when Steve saw who it was, betrayal churned his guts.

"Sharon?" he asked in a small voice.

Sharon was working with Tony.

No, Steve thought, that's impossible...

Tony had managed to take even that from him. He had taken even his last connection to Peggy...

He had turned Sharon against him...

How was that possible? She was Peggy's niece! How could she do this? How could she work with Tony!?
What about her speech at Peggy's funeral!? Did Peggy's words mean nothing to her!?

Her expression was serious. Angry, even.

The betrayal quickly turned into rage.

*What gives you the right to be angry, you backstabbing broad!?*

"You little..." he started to say as he stood up and moved towards her, with every intention to hurt her. He knew Tony and the others would stop him before he could, but in that moment he just wanted to get back at her for her betrayal, he didn't care how. He'd take what he could get, even if it was just a scared expression. Even if it only lasted a few moments.

But Sharon didn't look intimidated. Quite the opposite, in fact.

As soon as he was in front of her, she swung a kick right between his legs, as hard as she could.

Pain exploded in his groin, and Steve dropped to his knees. Immediately, Tony grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head back, pointing his other palm to his face, repulsor charged: "You better stop being difficult, Rogers. I've already had a shitty night, and the morning hasn't been much better, thanks to you. Don't play with what little patience I have left."

Steve knew he couldn't do anything. Swallowing his rage, he just closed his eyes in submission: "Okay..." he said with a soft voice.

"Miserable poser," he heard Sharon hiss as she walked past him and out of the jet.

Steve bristled, but when Tony tightened the hold in his hair, he swallowed again and didn't say anything.

***

Scott knew this part. He'd been in this situation before.

Exactly the same script every time. They had taken him to a dimly lit interrogation room and left him there alone for more than an hour.

He would have loved to be able to say this tactic didn't work on him anymore, but actually... it did. Scott felt like he could faint from fear at any moment.

Finally, after nearly an hour and fifteen minutes, the door opened, and Hope strolled into the room, followed by a young girl with red hair who weirdly reminded him of Tony Stark. She had Stark's eyes, Scott noticed as they sat across from him.

Scott lost no time, immediately trying to appeal to his girlfriend: "Hope-" he called in a begging tone, but she immediately stopped him, holding up a hand and sending him another scathing glare, just like she had on the plane.

Scott knew that when Hope was this mad, he'd better shut the fuck up. And that was exactly what he did.

"Here's what's gonna happen," Hope started, her tone cold as ice and her expression vaguely murderous, "the proper authorities are going to ship your sorry ass to prison as soon as I'm done talking to you. Once there, you're going to be contacted by my lawyers."

Scott allowed himself a breath of relief. *Thank God.*
Hope was gonna send her lawyers to help him. He knew she couldn't really have been working for Stark. She almost had him worried there.

"Said lawyers will present you with the charges that PymTech will be pressing against you for your actions in the last months."

Scott felt his stomach drop: "W-wha...?" he stuttered.

"You stole the Ant Man suit and used it to become a terrorist," Hope spat, glaring at him, "and now you're gonna pay for it, you worthless fucker."

Scott couldn't believe his ears: "Bu... but... no! Hank gave the suit to me! That's not the... You can't do that! The suit belongs to him! And... Hope, your father was captured by the Winter Soldier yesterday! You can't how can you just stand here when- Hope, I don't know what Stark did to you, but we can fix this, I... We have to save Hank! He could be-

"Okay, I'm gonna stop you right there, Mr. Bang," the redhead interrupted, cutting off his yammering.

"Lang," Scott corrected, still slightly dazed.

"Dang," the girl deadpanned completely serious, and despite everything, Scott had the distinct feeling that whatever her problem with him was, it was somehow related to Stark's 'who are you?' jab back at the Raft.

"Hank Pym has been apprehended and is currently in custody. He is unhurt."

Scott was left stumbling for a moment, unsure of what to respond. In the end, he turned to Hope: "What... what does it mean he's in custody? Hope, he's your father! How can you-

"Yes, he's my father," Hope replied angrily, "my father who abetted terrorists and murderers because he hates Tony Stark more than he loves me. My father who broke the laws that I was standing for, that I was fighting for. My father, who stood there and watched while Barton, Maximoff and Wilson tried to kill both me and Paxton in San Francisco. He deserves to rot in jail, and so do you."

Scott didn't know what was going on anymore: "Hope, I... We thought... That's not true, Hope. Hank loves you. He wants what's best for you... I want what's best for you! You're-

"Please don't, thank you," Hope cut him off, scoffing harshly, "I know where you're going there, and I'm afraid I'm gonna have to disappoint you. I don't know what I was expecting, I thought it was clear, but evidently you're way too stupid to take the hint: we're over, Scott. You're just a massive idiot, I can't believe I almost fell for you. The only saving grace in this clusterfuck is that at least it opened my eyes." she said.

Again, Scott fumbled with his words for quite a bit before settling on something coherent: "Hope, what has Stark done to you?" he asked softly.

Hope scoffed again, becoming even more hostile: "You mean what he's done besides saving me and Paxton from your terrorist friends, and also saving my company from yours and Hank's stupid-ass decisions? Well, let's see: he's welcomed me into the Avengers and offered his help when I needed it most, he's forgiven me for a pretty bad fuck-up when I ran off half-cocked to catch Hank in San Francisco... Oh, and then of course he has helped me actually catch both you and Hank, therefore putting an end to my company's technology being used for terrorism," she answered in a forcefully calm and sarcastic tone.
When Scott started stuttering again, the other girl butted in: "You know what, let me help you: 'But we're not terrorists! We were working with Captain America and fighting for what's right!' That's what you were gonna say next, weren't you, Lard?" she smirked a really Stark-like smirk.

Scott didn't bother correcting his last name again, mostly because the obnoxious girl was right this time: "Yes!" he exclaimed vehemently.

"And you think what Rogers did today was 'what's right'? Nearly running down civilians, smashing a police barricade, going through everyone and everything that stands in his way, just to go and save his best friend, without giving a single thought to anyone else?"

That gave Scott pause.

Steve had completely disregarded his concerns about Hank's safety. He truly had risked running civilians down with that van...

And before that?

When the arrow guy and the magic girl had been apprehended, Cap hadn't reacted in the same way at all... He'd said: 'We'll manage'...

Back in Leipzig, when he'd suggested he go giant as a diversion, Rogers had agreed immediately, and in the end he had fucked off to Siberia taking only his BFF with him... In the following months, he hadn't even bothered to ask about the guy that had gotten hurt, War Machine...

Yes, he'd broken them out of the Raft, but... was it really because he cared or was it because he could still use a team back then?

But... But that meant...

*Oh God...*

The two women had apparently seen the realization dawn on his face, because Hope spoke next: "Yeah, chilling thought, isn't it, Scott? You broke parole, became a terrorist and a fugitive for a guy who ultimately only cares about his old pal..." she said, before leaning forward with an absolutely serious expression, "...because you're an idiot," she added.

Scott could feel a panic attack building deep in the pit of his stomach: "Hope... Hope, please, you have to-"

"No," she stopped him, "I don't have to do anything, Scott. I'm not even sure what I *could* do."

Scott's voice broke: "Hope, please, there's gotta be something- I promised Cassie I would get my head on straight," he said, tears coming to his eyes.

A few months ago, Hope's heart would have broken at seeing him like this. Now, she couldn't bring herself to feel even an ounce of pity for him: "You should have thought about that promise when they called you to become a terrorist," she seethed, "You've made your own bed, Scott. Now you're gonna lay in it."

"No... Hope! Hope, wait!" Scott pleaded as Hope and the other girl got up and made to leave.

"Hope!" he called one last time. But the only answer he got was the sound of the door closing, only for it to reopen a few moments later when a bunch of guys in black tactical gear entered. One of them grabbed his arm and hauled him up, leading him out of the room without a single word.
This was it. This was the end of the road.
Scott started crying.

***

Sam was done deluding himself.

He was sure he had done the right thing. Steve was definitely going off the rails, he needed to be stopped before he could do something he would regret. Sam knew he had made the right decision in the end, but he wasn't expecting any favours from the Avengers for his belated epiphany.

Still, when James Rhodes entered the interrogation room on a pair of crutches, Vision opening the door for him, a small part of Sam felt like that was a pretty dickish move, as if they were trying to guilt-trip him or maybe rub his mistakes in his face.

He knew better than to voice those thoughts right now, though. He was going to let them speak first.

Both Vision and Rhoddy sat down, and the colonel was the first to talk: "Hello, Wilson," he hissed with all the authority in his voice that his officer rank gave him.

Sam visibly flinched. Rhodes was speaking to him as if to a complete stranger. As if they hadn't been part of the same team for more than a year.

Sam didn't look the other man in the eyes when he replied: "Rhodes, look... I'm sorry-"

"It's Colonel Rhodes, Wilson," Rhoddy interrupted him, "and I'm not interested in hearing any of your excuses. I'm not here as your friend, I'm here as an Avenger."

Sam's brow furrowed. "As an Avenger? But I thought-"

"I'm still an Avenger. I'm not on active duty of course, but my wounds are healing. I'll be back out in the field, eventually," Rhoddy explained in a clipped voice.

Sam didn't know what to make of it. For him, Leipzig had been... tricky to deal with. He tentatively smiled at his fellow airman: "That's good... I'm-"

"I'm not here to talk about that," Rhodes interrupted him again.

Sam lowered his gaze again: "Then why are you here?" he asked in a small voice.

"Industrial espionage," Rhoddy shrugged.

Sam didn't get it: "What?"

"The original EXO-7 Falcon Wings belonged to the Air Force. When you stole those, back in 2014, you were not legally prosecuted because the patent still belonged to Stark Industries, and in the wake of the fall of SHIELD, Rogers went to Tony and... pretty much ordered him to vouch for you with the higher ups," Rhoddy elaborated, disgust underlining his voice, "This time, however, you're not gonna fall on your feet."

Sam was confused: "But I-"

"Brought the wings to Hank Pym and allowed him to work on them. When you bring any patented piece of technology to one of the manufacturer's most well known competitors and let him tinker with it, it's called industrial espionage. Not the most pressing of your problems right now, admittedly,
but still something you're gonna have to deal with." Rhodey said.

Sam closed his eyes for a moment and drew a deep breath: "Look, I get that Stark is pissed-

This time, it was Vision who interrupted him: "Mr. Stark is not the one pressing charges. Stark Industries is, in the form of its CEO, Pepper Potts."

Sam's brow furrowed, but Vision continued without him needing to ask further questions: "You, Mr. Wilson, made Mr. Stark promise to go to Siberia 'alone and as a friend'. This led to Mr. Stark nearly dying. Alone, and at the hands of his supposed friend. You can understand that Ms. Potts was... upset, about this turn of events."

Sam was left floundering for a moment before he recovered. He turned back to Rhodey: "Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"SI is pressing charges against you," Rhodey shrugged, "Someone was gonna tell you, eventually."

"Yes, but why are you telling me this?" Sam pressed, "You're not affiliated to Stark Industries in any way! Why you, of all people?"

"Actually, I am affiliated to Stark Industries," Rhodey corrected, "I've been the military liaison with SI for more than fifteen years now. Not to mention I personally own a small amount of SI shares, and so far I'm also the only test subject for the prosthetic leg braces Tony has developed. But you're right, none of that plays into why I'm here, so we'll digress."

With some difficulties, Sam restrained himself from flinching at Rhodey's sideways mention of his injury. He let him continue.

"You surrendered yourself," the Colonel stated, "Makes me think you might deserve a fair warning."

Sam was grateful for the consideration. Really, he was. But he was also confused: "So what? You just... come here and tell me 'Hey, Pepper Potts wants your ass-cheeks on a silver platter for sending Tony alone in Siberia, sucks to be you', and then you leave? I was following Steve's orders! As Captain America-"

Rhodey furiously slammed his punch hard on the table. Sam was stunned into silence by the outburst.

"As Captain America, he decided to cover up a murder because it was his ol' pal who committed it. In all his self-righteousness, he decided that Bucky Barnes was worth lying for, while Tony Stark didn't even deserve the closure of knowing the truth about the death of his parents." Rhodey seethed, "Don't come preach to me about 'Captain America: God's Righteous Man', Wilson. I find it particularly disgusting."

Sam didn't flinch this time. Rhodey's reasoning was not entirely wrong, after all.

But he shook his head: "He was still my commanding officer," he replied stubbornly, "and I was following his orders. I didn't decide on my own to turn my gear over to Pym."

It was Vision who spoke next: "And are you willing to testify that?"

Sam raised an eyebrow: "Pardon?"

"He asked you if you're willing to testify that," Rhodey said, having calmed down slightly, "in a court. At your trial. And at Rogers' trial too."
Sam was starting to understand: "So that's what this is about? That's why you came to warn me about Potts making her move? To persuade me to testify against Steve?"

"Yes," Rhodey deadpanned, "and if you have even a smidgeon of self-preservation, you should take the chance immediately. It's the only way if you don't want to experience what being on the bad side of the Stark Industries Legal department feels like."

Sam couldn't resist a jab: "And what about your dear friend Pepper? Does she know you're bailing me out? How would she take it if I got away with it?"

Rhodes scoffed: "Contrary to your previous statement, Pepper doesn't care much about 'your ass-cheeks on a silver platter'. This thing about the Falcon suit? It's about righting a wrong. You wronged Tony by stealing his gear, and Pepper wants someone to pay for it. She doesn't care if it's you or Rogers. Besides, there are plenty of other charges against both of you, so she'll get to see you both burn either way. She's just... extracting her pound of flesh, so to speak."

Sam was gobsmacked. Was Potts really that vindictive?

And yet... Sam found that he could understand her. What Steve had done in Siberia... it was simply unforgivable.

But was it right for Sam to turn his back on Steve like that and just think for himself? After all, Steve was his leader... And they had been fighting the good fight...

"The Accords..." Sam started, not really knowing what to say.

"What about the Accords, Mr. Wilson?" Vision asked when it became clear that Sam wasn't going to finish his phrase. "The reason you fought against the Accords was that you believed the bureaucracy would tie your hands, wasn't it? Well, the facts speak for themselves: Iron Man has saved Ms. Romanoff and the Barton family from General Ross, who was never able to swing the Accords against him, or us. Then, ever since you and your team have been back in action, the Avengers have been one step ahead of you in nearly every occasion: at Berwick, in San Francisco, and today. In the only occasion when your team operated without interference, you caused an economical disaster by nearly blocking the Panama Canal. I believe the results are firmly in our favour..."

Sam was left speechless. Vision had a point: every time they had fought the Avengers, they had had their butts handed to them, and when they hadn't, they had fucked up royally.

He took a shuddered breath: "If I testify against Steve, will they take my cooperation into account?" he asked, feeling like a beggar pleading for a coin.

"Probably," Rhodes responded, "It helps that you surrendered yourself without a fight. You might be able to shave off a few years. Not many, but a few."

Sam felt a shiver going down his spine at the prospect of going to prison for years. And yet... it made perfect sense. He was a terrorist.

He lowered his head: "I'll do it," he said in a small voice.

***

Unlike Sam and Scott, Steve and Bucky hadn't been taken into an interrogation room. Instead, they had been thrown into reinforced cells immediately upon being hauled out of the Avengers Quinjet.

The two cells in question were next to one another, and both the wall facing the corridor and the
dividing wall were entirely made of bulletproof (maybe even Hulk-proof) glass. It didn't offer any privacy, but at least Steve was able to keep an eye on Bucky.

His best friend was sat on a bench on the far wall of his cell, looking completely and utterly lost, his face still bloody from his broken nose. Steve felt bad just looking at him. He had tried banging his hand on the divider to get Bucky's attention, but it didn't seem to work. Maybe the cells were also soundproofed.

After a long time, someone finally appeared.

Tony and Sharon.

They strolled up to the cells and stopped right in front of them. They both appeared perfectly calm and collected, while Steve was about to choke in anguish.

Sharon turned to look at him as if he was just dirt under her shoes. Steve was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that she was working with Tony and supporting the Accords.

He wondered if she had betrayed him after Leipzig or if she had never been on his side to begin with, if Tony had planted her as a mole in his team, maybe after the bombing in Vienna.

Peggy would be so disgusted.

Tony was not even paying attention to them, obnoxiously texting on his phone. Despite that, he was the one who spoke first:

"So," he started, never taking his eyes off the phone, "are you happy?"

Steve immediately went on the defensive: "Tony, this is-"

"I wasn't talking to you," Tony interrupted him, holding up a hand and looking Steve dead in the eye, before turning to Bucky: "Are you happy?" he asked again, putting the phone away.

Bucky only gave him a confused look.

"You wanted to speak with me, did you not?" Tony asked simply, "Well, here I am. What did you wanna talk about? My parents? Siberia? Your fucked up brain?"

Bucky didn't answer. He just lowered his head in shame, curling up more on himself.

Steve's heart was breaking at seeing his best friend being treated like that and not being able to do anything about it, but he was also confused: Bucky had wanted to speak with Tony? What was that about?

Regardless, he still felt like he had to defend his friend: "Tony, leave him alone! He's gone through enough tonight!"

"You don't say," Tony answered, still perfectly calm and still looking at Bucky, "did Maximoff try to rape him in his sleep too?"

The non-sequitur left Steve stumbling: "What?" he asked dumbly, "What are you-"

Tony waved him off, never taking his eyes off Bucky: "Not something I wanna talk about. What I wanna talk about right now is the fact that he took eight hostages today."

Bucky was clearly not gonna answer. He had propped his right elbow on his knee, covering his face
with his human hand, while his left arm was still limp at his side. It was clear the Avengers had deactivated it, judging by the hole in the shoulder.

So Steve, again, answered in his stead: "It wasn't his fault, and you know it! It was Hydra!"

"Yeah, no," Tony replied, still keeping his eyes trained on Bucky and his voice low and calm, "This guy was clearly acting as James Barnes, now the Winter Soldier this morning. He was not under Hydra's conditioning when we took him in."

"Yes he was!" Steve screeched, "Hydra used him again! They triggered him and forced him to attack us!"

"They didn't," Sharon said flatly, speaking for the first time since she and Tony had arrived, "Oliver Caldwell was not a Hydra operative. He was a SHIELD agent who got burned in the Hydra info-dump and wanted revenge on you for ruining his life. He saw an opportunity and took it. Not a nice guy, for sure, but not Hydra either. And besides, I seriously doubt he ordered Barnes here to create a hostage situation in case his plan was foiled..." 

Steve clenched his fists in frustration.

He didn't know that about Caldwell. Actually, it made sense if he was just a stray like Zemo: after years of hunting down every single dormant cell, at this point Hydra was basically gone, for all intents and purposes.

But it didn't change the fact that Bucky wasn't to blame.

"Bucky was scared," he gritted through his teeth, "He had just been brainwashed, again. He was not thinking straight."

"Neither were you, apparently," Tony replied airily, finally turning to him.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Steve demanded.

"Well, you run a police blockade, nearly flattening civilian bystanders, and then set Lang Kong loose in a residential area, no doubt counting on him to cause massive property damage in order to distract us. All that, for the sole purpose of getting your precious Bucky back. Ring a bell?" Tony replied in a detached voice.

Steve felt a pang of shame: "I-I didn't know where Bucky was or in what conditions he was in, and... and I couldn't trust you not to try to kill him. You had already tried to kill him once, in Siberia!" he tried to justify himself.

It was again Sharon who retorted: "You're a soldier, Rogers. You should be able to estimate the strength of your opponents. And you have seen Iron Man in action countless times. Do you really think your puny serum is enough to go up against that kind of firepower? If Tony wanted you two dead back in Siberia, all he had to do was fly outside and use his heavy weaponry to turn the entire place into a smoking crater. The pair of you would have been vaporized into your elementary particles."

Steve flinched.

Once arriving in Wakanda with his team and finally having the time to think about the fight in Siberia with a cool mind, Steve had suspected Tony had been holding back. Then, after facing him again in Pennsylvania, where Tony had been absolutely toying with them, batting them around with practically zero effort, that suspect had pretty much become a certainty.
"And besides," Sharon added, "today we already had Barnes in custody by the time you showed up. Tony has had plenty of time to kill him if he wanted to, and he didn't. So, do you wanna try to come up with a better excuse?"

Steve tried to argue: "Sharon, you don't understa-"

"Oh, I understand perfectly well now, Rogers," she said with disgust, looking him dead in the eyes, "Thank God you didn't bring me to Wakanda with you. You did me one hell of a favour by hanging me out to dry after Leipzig. It forced me to look past the 'America's Golden Boy' malarkey and see the real you. Frankly, I'm not impressed. You're just a brainless jock with a high opinion of himself. I guess you really should never, ever meet your heroes."

Steve didn't even know how to feel anymore. He was scared, sad, angry, and now he somehow even felt like he had wronged Sharon. What was going on?

Again, he tried to justify himself: "The Accords-

"Oh, screw the Accords, Rogers!" Sharon shot back, "You know full well that if you really didn't agree with the Accords, all you had to do was retire! It was never about the Accords! It was all about him!" she said, pointing at Bucky's hunched form.

Steve finally came up with a retort: "Yes! Yes, it was about him! You were the one who told me you had orders to shoot on sight!" he said, feeling slightly proud at having finally found a compelling argument.

But Sharon squashed it immediately: "And we did. 'We' being the CIA, not the German police! I didn't know what orders the BKA was given, how could I when it's an entirely different organization than the one I was part of!!?"

Steve reeled back as if he had been burned.

Was it true? Did those German special forces really have different orders than Sharon's teammates?

Thinking about it... they had used stun grenades in Bucky's apartment... and they didn't have any sniper in position... There was a helicopter, but it had only intervened after Bucky had fled the apartment block and T'Challa had engaged as well...

...Had he really made such a big mistake?

"Yeah, you fucked that one up, Rogers. Big time." Tony said, still keeping his tone and posture absolutely calm, seeing Steve's confused expression.

Steve stumbled for a moment, but then he defiantly raised his chin: "He's still alive. I don't regret helping my friend," he stated.

"Helping, Rogers?" Tony asked, raising an eyebrow, "So far you've only made things worse for him."

"What are you talking about?" Steve retorted, "Was I supposed to let Ross have his way? Or to let you have another go at him again?"

Tony shrugged, seemingly unfazed by Steve's thinly-veiled accusation: "For starters, I'd say you were supposed to tell me the truth about my parents, before I had to watch a video of your buddy murdering them in cold blood while he was standing five feet from me."
Steve flinched visibly, but Tony went on: "And then, you definitely weren't supposed to drag him around the world causing disasters everywhere you went. As a known Hydra operative, he could really have used some time away from the spotlight."

"For God's sake, Tony! The Winter Soldier's actions aren't Bucky's fault! Hydra was controlling him!"

"Yeah, about that," Tony said, always keeping the casual tone, "I'm working on this system, to help cure PTSD. It's called BARF, and before you think ill of me, that's an acronym for 'Binarily Augmented Retro Framing'. It works on the hippocampus to help cope with traumatic memories. In Barnes' case, it would come in handy to remove all that Hydra programming that made him a puppet for Zemo and then Caldwell to play with. And, consequently, it would also help him avoid snapping like he did his morning."

Steve was left speechless. What was Tony saying?

Was he offering to help Bucky?

Why would he do that?

"But," Tony went on, "because of you, Rogers... Because you've dragged him along for the whole ride in your mad crusade against the entire world... now he's actually better off as he is now. I really could have helped him, but you, you blew his chance for him."

Other than clenching his fists, Steve didn't react immediately. It took him a very long moment to get his emotions under control.

Was Tony really dangling a solution for Bucky's problems right in front of Bucky's eyes and then telling him he couldn't have it?

How could he be so vindictive? So... petty?

"Tony," he started, trying to be reasonable despite feeling a nearly uncontrollable urge to punch something, "Bucky was Howard's friend. He would never... he would never have... done that, if Hydra hadn't forced him. Yes, I should have told you about your parents before, but that was my mistake, not Bucky's. Refusing to help him because of what you saw in Siberia, or to get back at me for my mistakes... that's just not fair. At all."

Tony only looked at him for a few seconds before speaking: "Wow," he said in the same detached tone he had kept during the entire conversation, signalling that Steve's words hadn't affected him in the slightest: "Congratulations, Rogers, that's the closest you've gotten to an actual apology ever since that stupid letter. Too bad you clearly didn't understand anything of what I said. Let me explain it better: it's not about my parents! Even if I wanted to help him get rid of the Winter Soldier - and I actually do, if only to destroy the weapon that killed my parents - that's not the reason he can't use BARF."

"Then what is it!?" Steve snapped angrily, tired of Tony's demeanor.

Tony remained infuriatingly calm as he went in for the kill: "It's because now, he's gonna have to face trial for international terrorism. Not only for his actions as the Winter Soldier, but also for what James Barnes has done since flying out of Wakanda. Now, his chances don't look too bad he advocates for reduced mental capacity, because of the Winter Soldier programming, but if we erase that... he runs the risk of having both his most recent crimes and his Winter Soldier missions to be treated as his responsibility and his alone, because nobody would believe he had been brainwashed if
we get him fixed so quickly. In that case, a death sentence would be pretty much inevitable, given the six decades of Winter Soldier activity in his resume."

Steve felt his heart skip a beat.

Tony pressed on: "And why did this happen? Because you kept drawing attention on yourself, and in turn, on him. Nearly blowing up a nuclear facility? Sinking a ship inside the Panama Canal? That kind of things tends to end up on front pages," he said.

In that moment, Steve felt completely lost.

It was his fault.

Bucky was in this situation because of him.

He turned towards his best friend, and Bucky was now looking up at Tony, still with that broken expression.

"Yes Barnes, he stuck you between a rock and a hard place," Sharon considered, acknowledging him, "you might want to rethink how you choose your friends..."

Steve wanted to argue, but found that he couldn't. He was trembling slightly, his vision going a bit blurry. He had never felt such anguish, not even when he had asthma attacks, before the serum.

He barely heard Tony agree with Sharon: "Yep. You fucked him over sideways, Rogers. I'm curious, though... how did you plan to help him with the Winter Soldier triggers? Were you going to let Wanda tinker with his brain? Hey, Barnes," he called, turning to Bucky, "Would you even trust the little witch mess with your brain in the off chance she could fix it? I mean, she was Hydra, after all..."

Steve's eyes bulged. He turned to his friend, and Bucky was now shifting his eyes, wide and disbeliefing, between Steve and Tony. "...She was Hydra?" Bucky asked, almost whispering, after a few more seconds.

Tony still kept his tone infuriatingly casual: "Oh, he didn't tell you, did he? Yeah, he tends to do that... But yes, Wanda Maximoff was Hydra, before Steve-O here decided to invite her to join the Avengers. And unlike you, she wasn't forced in any way. She willingly joined them to be experimented on. Where do you think her powers come from?"

For a moment, there was silence. You could hear a pin drop.

Then, Bucky's face contorted in utter, ugly rage as he stood up from his cell and stalked to the divider wall. He slammed the palm of his human hand against the glass: "What the hell is wrong with you!? Are you crazy!?" he yelled.

Steve didn't answer, too horrified by the entire situation.

Bucky started punching the glass: "You bastard!" was the only intelligible thing he shouted, before he started yelling like a madman, punching the glass so hard his knuckles broke, leaving bloody splotches on the glass everytime he hit it. The glass itself wasn't budging, but Steve took a step back anyway.

Tony sighed: "Friday, put him to sleep, will you?"

Immediately, gas started filling Bucky's cell. He kept punching the wall for a good minute before the
tranquillizer gas took effect, making him slump against the divider, his face still twisted in anger.

"Spokoynoy nochi, tovarishch," Tony smirked cheerfully.

It took Steve a long moment to recover from the scare: "Why would you do that!?" he yelled then, "Why did you tell him such a thing!? That was completely uncalled for!"

"What, didn't he have the right to know?" Tony asked casually, "I thought teammates were not supposed to have secrets..."

Steve got angry: "Why are you doing this!? Wanda is just a kid!"

"There it is!" Tony exclaimed, turning to Sharon, "See? I told you!"

Sharon shook her head: "Unbelievable, you said that for real!" she laughed, facing Steve, "A twenty-six years old woman is 'just a kid' to you? I thought Tony was just messing with me when he told me that!"

Before Steve could react, Tony took a step closer: "Be honest, Rogers: do you have a daddy kink going on with Wanda?"

Steve's eyebrows scrunched together: "What?" he asked dumbly.

Tony gave him a sideways glance: "Do you call her 'Daddy's little princess' when nobody's looking?"

Steve still didn't get it. Tony went on: "Do you make her wear diapers? Did you buy her a pink pacifier? Does she hug a teddybear and suck her thumb while you fuck her?"

Steve reeled back in complete embarrassment as he finally understood the meaning of Tony's words. But before he could come up with any retort whatsoever, Sharon chimed in: "And here I was, thinking he had a cyborg fetish instead... Bet you he would really like a metal handjob from his boyfriend there..."

In the midst of his turmoil, Steve found anger. He really didn't like their tone: "Do you guys have no shame whatsoever!?" he yelled, absolutely flustered, "Leave Bucky out of this!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Sharon chuckled sarcastically in a way that reminded him way too much of Tony, "but all I hear from you is 'Bucky Bucky Bucky Bucky Bucky'. That's a bit misleading, you know?"

"Yeah, and the most fun part is that in trying to help his boyfriend, he completely screwed up his life!" Tony added.

Steve finally snapped: "None of this would have happened if it weren't for the Accords!" he shrieked, "Zemo wouldn't have framed Bucky, you wouldn't have stepped in and we wouldn't have fought!"

"No, Rogers," Tony responded, and for the first time, his face had gone angry, furious, even, so much so that Steve actually shut up.

"Zemo would have found another way to frame Barnes. But if you had trusted me, if you had come to me instead of running to Bucharest all by yourself, I could have helped you. I would have helped you. And Siberia? That wouldn't have happened if only you had told me the truth about my parents years ago. Yes, I would have snapped, maybe punched something, maybe blamed Barnes at first, but at least I would have had the time to process the news. I would have had the closure I fucking
But you decided I couldn't be trusted with a personal information that I had all the right to have and that you had no fucking right to withhold. And now, here we are."

Steve's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but no words came out.

He couldn't find anything to say to defend himself. Not anymore.

"All of this is your fault, Rogers. Your boyfriend's situation is your fault. Wanda, Clint, Sam and that Lang loser being in jail is your fault. This-"

Tony's eyes glowed orange as he motioned to them with his hand, showing his mysterious enhancements. Steve took a step back in fear.

"...is your fault," Tony concluded, "Because you're nothing but a self-righteous, idiotic prick who thinks too highly of himself."

Steve was breathing heavily now. Tony took another step closer: “You once asked me, looking down your nose at me from the top of your moral superiority and self-righteousness, what I would be without a suit of armor. Well, one thing is for sure: suit of armor or not, I wouldn’t be an international terrorist. I wouldn’t choose one person over the entire world. I wouldn’t be one tenth of the criminal you are.”

Steve stared at him like a deer caught in headlights. Cold sweat was forming on his forehead and down his spine.

Tony said nothing more. He turned on his heels and left. Sharon sent one last disgusted look his way, before leaving as well.

Leaving him alone.

After a long moment, Steve’s still petrified eyes dropped to the floor.

...Criminal.

Chapter End Notes

"Spokoynoy nochi, tovarishch" is Russian for "Good night, comrade."

So, you know that note up there about trying to be on time with future chapters? Well, the next update could be a new chapter or the first connected one-shot to the main story, I'm not sure yet. Either way, it should come in about two weeks ;-).
Moving on

Chapter Summary

Now that Team Cap has been dealt with, things go back to normal. Well, a new normal.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so... I had promised to try and be more punctual, and I'm five days late. Sorry...

^^'

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ever since the first clash in Bucharest between Captain America, the Black Panther and the Winter Soldier, the so-called 'Avengers Civil War' had been the topic of choice among the media from all over the world. The people, already set on edge by the events in Lagos, the announcement of the Sokovia Accords and then the bombing in Vienna, had eagerly watched the events unfold, some hoping the whole ordeal would be resolved peacefully, with the Avengers being reunited once more, others asking for those among the Avengers who had gone rogue to answer for their crimes.

The media had debated extensively over every new development: first Leipzig, which had cost Captain America's faction many supporters, then Siberia as well, after Pepper Potts had held a press conference in which she had stated that Tony Stark had been seriously injured in a further confrontation with Steve Rogers and James Barnes, to the point where his very life had been endangered. Again 'Team Cap' had lost consensus, although nowhere near as much as they would have if Pepper had told the whole story: that Tony had been lied to for years by a supposed friend, then beaten half to death and left to die in an abandoned Hydra bunker in the middle of a frozen wasteland.

Berwick, Pennsylvania ended up having a much bigger resonance: the newly reformed Avengers, with Tony Stark at the helm, had carried out their duty flawlessly, despite being fewer in numbers than the original team. But then Captain America and his rogue faction had shown up, and had nearly turned a perfectly executed rescue mission into a nuclear disaster. For many people that had been the final straw, especially among US citizens.

Up to this point the American people, or at least the vast majority of them, still saw Steve Rogers as 'America's Golden Boy': the epitome of righteousness, the guardian of truth, justice and the American way, a good man by default, physically incapable of doing anything wrong. But after Berwick, after Captain America had nearly caused a nuclear catastrophe and it had taken Iron Man and the other Avengers to prevent it... more and more Americans started to question their beliefs. They started to ask themselves if the US Army's poster boy wasn't actually just that: a poster boy. They were asking themselves if that experimental serum had really created something akin to an angel, a living legend, or just an enhanced man.

A flawed man.

So Steve Rogers was not very loved when two of his followers, Wanda Maximoff and Clint Barton,
were captured in San Francisco by Iron Man and the Wasp. This time, it was the Avengers who had most of the public's support, and that support grew even more when Hope Van Dyne gave her press statement, openly accusing her own father and accusing Rogers' followers of having tried to kill the two Avengers and an unenhanced policeman.

However, the news of Barton and Maximoff's capture didn't get as much resonance as the skirmish in Pennsylvania had. Partly because of the Wasp, an Avenger, labelling her own father a terrorist, but mostly because of Lady Iron.

Iron Man's newest partner had had the media wrapped around her little finger ever since her first appearance, when Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross had shown his true colors. As soon as the news about the former General's demise had gone public, pictures of Lady Iron's sleek, feminine suit of armor had flooded the Internet like wildfire, and the mysterious new Avenger had immediately risen as the new idol of little girls and boys alike all over the world. A modern superhero, as cool as Iron Man himself, and a perfect example of 'Girl Power', Lady Iron had the whole package. The world at large had fallen in love with her.

So when a video of her helmet-less figure had popped up on the net, Youtube's servers had very nearly crashed. And interestingly enough, nobody had noticed that this video had appeared right in time to make the public opinion lose interest in every other news related to the Avengers: Hawkeye and the Scarlet Witch being captured? Good news. PymTech's financial problems due to Hank Pym being a terrorist? Just... news. Lady Iron showing her face? Mediatic explosion.

All kinds of questions and speculations were running rampant about the young redhead donning an Iron Man-class suit of armor. Who was she? Where did she come form? How had she met Tony Stark? Was she related to him?

The result of all this was that slowly, the entire Avengers Civil War was becoming yesterday's news. Yes, Captain America was not the perfect man people believed him to be. Shocking, but they could deal with that. Yes, the Avengers had been torn apart, but the New Avengers had risen from the ashes, stronger than before.

The events of Panama had somewhat galvanized the media again, because of the much bigger economical backlash. But at this point, the public opinion was pretty much already set: Steve Rogers was wrong. There were no debates over what had happened in Panama. Nobody tried to defend Steve Rogers' actions. That ordeal had no other effect than further condemnation for him and his team.

And thus, when the time for the grand finale came, four days later, and Steve Rogers along with all of his remaining followers was apprehended in Philadelphia, it was still breaking news, but not as much as Leipzig or Berwick had been. Captain America (if he could still be called that) was already, slowly but surely, fading into irrelevance. And one of the main reasons for that was, once again, Lady Iron.

A particular meme had first appeared on Tumblr less than three hours after the events of Philadelphia. It showed two pictures: the first one was of Rogers, battered and bloody and covered in grime, his uniform filthy and tattered, probably taken right after the Battle of Sokovia; the other picture was a still of the infamous video that had first shown Lady Iron without her helmet on, her hair flowing gently with the wind and her armor spotless, glowing in the sunlight. Under Steve's picture there was a caption that read: 'Team Cap went down, and not a single fuck was given that day'. Under Friday's picture, another caption said: 'Not a single fuck was given that day, because Lady Iron is Tony Stark's daughter'.

The end of Team Cap had left many loose ends and unanswered questions. For example: was the
Winter Soldier acting on his own volition before being captured, when he took those hostages, or had that somehow been an order from Rogers? And speaking of Rogers: was he gonna get the harsh sentence nearly everyone was asking for, or did the Captain America image still have enough pull for him to dodge most of the bullets? Also, what was gonna happen to the rest of Team Cap?

Still, all these questions didn't get anywhere near as much mediatic attention as those concerning Lady Iron, or as she had called herself, Friday Ana Stark. Now that she had outing herself as Tony's daughter, people wanted to know everything about her.

Where did she come from?

Who was her mother?

What did her father think of her being a superhero?

In the end, the press got so insistent that they practically forced the Starks to hold a press conference. That was why Tony and Friday were currently sitting at a desk in the Avengers Compound, in front of an enormous crowd of trepidating journalists from everywhere around the world. Of course, among them was also Christine Everhart, gazing hungrily at the conference desk from her seat in the front row, always trying her best to get the latest news on everything involving Tony Stark. Next to the conference desk, close to the left wall, Pepper Potts and Happy Hogan were also in attendance, surveying the room.

Tony gave the crowd his patented press smile: "So, I understand you people have some questions?" he said.

The entire room exploded. Hands were raised frantically, and people shot to their feet as if performing a standing ovation. Some of the reporters in the back rows even stood on their chairs to be more visible.

Tony chuckled: "Yup, that's what I thought. Friday, you wanna get started?" he called, looking at his daughter.

"Of course," she smiled, "You, good sir, third row," Friday said pointing to a man to her left.

The reporter stayed up while everyone else slowly sat down. When the room had quieted enough, he spoke: "Miss Stark, nobody knew you existed until last week, and being Mr. Stark's daughter, that's an incredible feat in and of itself. Where have you been all this time?"

Friday chuckled: "Well, it's a bit more complicated than it looks. Up until about seven months ago, I didn't have a physical body."

Confused noises echoed through the room. Friday waited for those to diffuse before she continued: "I was created by Tony Stark as an artificial intelligence, but seven months ago, an accident involving some experimental medical equipment occurred at the Avengers Compound. I cannot go into the details as the equipment in question is, as I said, a highly experimental prototype, and any and all information about it remains classified to this day, but my coding was synthetized in an artificial human body."

The surprise was enough to silence most of the reporters. The conference had barely started, and already the big bombs were starting to drop.

One guy in the back of the room recovered the fastest: "So you're a cyborg of some sort?" he asked.

"The most correct definition is 'artificial human'. My DNA is fully compatible with a human one,"
Friday replied.

"But you were created as an artificial intelligence, like Ultron was," another reporter said with an air of superiority. Friday was unpleasantly reminded of Steve Rogers' expression of self-righteous disapproval, even though this man and Rogers couldn't be more different: this guy was short, fat and completely bald. He kind of looked like the Michelin Tyres mascot, "and now you're flying around in a suit of armor. Should we be afraid?" he sneered.

From her vantage on the side of the room, Pepper's eyes narrowed dangerously. She was expecting Everhart to be the problematic one today, but Christine was actually looking at her rotund colleague with a mix of disbelief and disapproval.

Pepper made a mental note to put Porky Pig there on her personal black list. Assholes like him always managed to make their way into a press conference, but at the very least she could make sure they only managed it once.

Friday, however, took it perfectly in stride. She gave the man a curt smile and leaned forward: "Yes, I was born as an artificial intelligence, like Ultron. Or like Vision, who is actually a lot more powerful than I am even after I put on my armour. Besides, as an enhanced individual I have had to sign the Sokovia Accords before I could start working with the Avengers..."

Many of the other reporters chuckled in amusement at Friday's answer, but the Michelin Man wasn't deterred: "And so what?" he asked condescendingly.

"And so, as an AI with a physical body, Ultron's precedent made my registration a bit more complicated than it would be for other enhanced individuals. I had to be evaluated and cleared for field duty by the Sokovia Accords Central Committee before I could ever put on my suit and get in a fight. Nobody wants another Ultron, and I fully understand that. I don't want another Ultron either. That's why I couldn't just sign the Accords and be done with it... Someone in the Accords Committee pushed for further testing at the time, but in the end, I was given the all-clear."

Michelin Man's cheeks were getting redder now. Things were most definitely not going his way, and he sure wasn't making a nice impression. But he was a tough one: "So your clearance wasn't decided unanimously? Maybe someone didn't trust another AI made by Tony Stark?"

At this point it was clear that this guy was only there to provoke them. The poor moron probably thought he could get a scoop if he caused tempers to flare, or something. Many of the other reporters were actually murmuring among themselves, saying that Friday had never given anyone a reason to doubt her, and this guy was being deliberately obtuse. Even Christine was shaking her head.

However, Friday only grinned like a shark. Michelin Man had taken her bait: "Yes, there was one member of the Committee who wanted to run more tests on me. His name was Thaddeus Ross. You may remember him for his particularly inglorious demise and subsequent fall from grace," she said casually.

Many people in the room, including Tony, had to suppress a laugh. After his death, Ross' name had been covered in mud, with the Press utterly destroying his reputation, and Michelin Man had basically just implied he had his same opinions.

Finally admitting defeat and not wanting to dig himself into an even bigger hole, the pudgy reporter sat down with a mortified expression. Friday sent a last, completely fake smile his way before pointing to another reporter, a brunette woman in her forties: "Yes, you over there, miss," she called.

The woman stood "Miss Stark, despite your... unorthodox origins, you refer to yourself as Tony's
daughter. Is it just a reference to Mr. Stark originally programming you as an AI or are we actually looking at Tony Stark's heiress?"

"I'd like to answer that one myself, if you don't mind," Tony smiled, leaning forward: "Friday is my daughter in every way that counts. And I do mean every way, even in genetics: she has half of her alleles in common with me. That makes her my daughter even in the most strict sense of the word," he said, convinced. It had taken him a while to get around to acknowledge the fact that he had a daughter, but after Friday had been hurt in Pennsylvania, he hadn't just accepted it. He had embraced it proudly: "So yes, she's the real deal. You are actually looking at Tony Stark's heiress."

Again, excited chatter erupted in the room. Friday pointed at another reporter, an Asian man in the fifth row: "Mr. Stark just told us about your genetic profile. Do you know from whom the other half of your alleles comes from? In other words, do you also have a mother, Miss Stark?" he asked, already showing his suspicions by glancing at Pepper's figure to the left of the room.

Friday smirked. Her answer, this time, was very telegraphic: "I do," was all she said.

The reporter hesitated a moment and again glanced at Pepper, but when it became clear that Friday wasn't gonna spill without further prompting, he decided to ask: "May we know who-"

He stopped mid-sentence when Pepper calmly strolled towards the desk with a smile on her face, leaned down next to Friday and put an arm around her shoulders, before speaking in Friday's microphone: "That would be me," she said.

As Pepper straightened herself and calmly walked back to her previouis spot, still smiling, she was bombarded by questions from nearly every reporter in the room. But they were in for a disappointment. They weren't gonna get anything more from her today.

After all, it hadn't entirely been a surprise for them. Ever since the video showing Friday without her helmet on had first hit the net, a lot of theories and speculations were that Friday was related to Pepper. Either her daughter, or her niece, or a cousin of some sort, but still a close relative. Everyone had noticed the resemblance between the two redheads, and all Pepper had just done was simply confirm the suspicions.

"Alright, people, Miss Potts is not part of the conference," Tony said placatingly, slowly getting back the attention of the reporters, "does anyone have any more questions?"

Another man from the back raised his hand: "Mr. Stark, how do you feel about your daughter following in Iron Man's footsteps?"

That was a difficult one. Tony took a deep breath: "How do I feel. Well, obviously it's pretty scary, but Friday has worked a lot with me, even before gaining a human body. Before she became physical, she was linked to my armor and was basically my copilot. She's been with me on several missions... including Leipzig and Siberia. She knows how Iron Man works, how the Avengers work. And she's always had my back. Because of that, Friday and I have learned to work together flawlessly in the field. So yes, I'm always a bit worried when we suit up, but I know for a fact that Lady Iron can take care of herself."

The reporter sat down after Tony had answered, but at this point Christine Everhart finally made her move. She raised her hand: "I have a question for you, Mr. Stark."

Tony gave her a mildly exhasperated look: "I'd be disappointed if you didn't, Christine."

She didn't react to the jab, instead asking her question as if Tony hadn't even spoken: "The Avengers
have suffered terrible consequences in the recent past because Steve Rogers was only concerned with the safety of one person, James Barnes, and therefore led his team into the ground. With that in mind, shouldn't someone else lead the Avengers, considering you have your own daughter on the team? Or do you believe you will always be able to make the best, most impartial decisions even in the most extreme situations?"

If she expected to catch Tony off guard, she was about to be disappointed. Tony didn't even flinch when he answered: "That's a very good question, and I'm glad it was brought up, because it's understandable if people are concerned. I've become the leader of the Avengers out of necessity, but now that necessity no longer exists: the Avengers are back, we have a new team that works much better that the original one. My position as team leader was never intended to be permanent. That is why, as soon as War Machine is able to return to active duty, he will also take my position as the team's field leader."

Once again, the room was awash with chatter. It was completely out of left field for the press, but Tony had been thinking about this ever since Friday had gotten hurt in Pennsylvania. Christine had been blunt (as it was expected from her) but she was right. He couldn't, in good conscience, trust himself to not be biased towards Friday as much as Rogers had been biased towards Barnes, if not more. And because of that, he couldn't continue to lead the team.

"I will step down from my current position knowing that I couldn't possibly leave it to a more qualified person," Tony continued after a few seconds, "James Rhodes is a US Air Force senior officer with a stellar career. He is he knows how the Avengers operate and he has plenty of training in military leadership."

The 'unlike Steve Rogers' went unsaid, but every single person in the room heard it anyway.

"Now, are there any more questions?"

No one replied. Apparently, the last announcement had left even Christine at a loss of words. Come to think of it, these guys had a lot to digest, with Friday's true origins and him soon stepping down from leader of the Avengers. It was time to call it a day.

"Splendid," Tony smiled, "Then we'll declare this conference over. Thank you all again for coming today."

***

Pepper knew, in the back of her mind, that she should try to appear a bit more dignified. But really, what was the point?

First of all, she was enveloped head to toe in armor, so nobody could actually see her face. Second, they were flying at high altitude over the North Atlantic, so there was nobody around to see her at all, and third, Friday was monitoring all her vitals, so she must have already picked up on her accelerated heartbeat. And if not her heartbeat, then her *squealing giggles.*

Whatever. Nobody ever said she wasn't allowed to have some fun once in a while.

She still wasn't entirely sure this gig was exactly her kind of thing, but she was the one who had asked for a suit, after all. Besides, her opinion was rapidly changing.

She hadn't thought it possible. The first time she had been in one of Tony's armors had been when Killian had destroyed her house. Admittedly not the best first time one could possibly have.

But now, wrapped in a custom built suit of armor designed specifically for her and with no nutjobs in
helicopters blowing her house apart, she could definitely see the appeal.

Flying over the ocean at supersonic speed without a plane was definitely something else.

"How do you feel it, Mom?" Friday asked over the comm, "Everything all right so far?"

Pepper glanced behind her and to her left where Friday was speeding through the skies, slightly above her, watching her closely: "I think I'm getting the hang of it," Pepper answered in an overexcited voice, before performing a perfect, if slowly paced, barrel roll.

"Alright then," Tony's voice came over the comm, "let's see what you've got, shall we?"

Pepper turned to her right, to Iron Man's figure flying parallel to her: "Hang on a sec-" she tried to protest, but Tony didn't listen: "Aw, come on, Pep, don't be a killjoy! It's like playing tag, only at Mach five! Ready? Go!"

Tony and Friday both engaged the afterburners on their suits, leaving her behind.

Both of them could reach top speeds way beyond any aircraft in existence. Pepper's suit was a more basic design, without any offensive weapon system other than the repulsors and unibeam, but because of that it was a lot less heavy. Thanks to the higher power to weight ratio, Pepper's suit clocked out at Mach 5.5, slightly faster than theirs... if they didn't use their Extremis superchargers. If they did, they could both easily surpass Mach 7 and leave her in the dust.

Pepper's suit didn't have those superchargers. Not that she wasn't glad that the Extremis in her body had been rendered inert, but in retrospect... yeah, it would have been nice to have the fastest armor.

Oh well. She was gonna make do with what she had.

She hit her own afterburners, starting the pursuit. There was probably something to be said about using incredibly powerful, fast, advanced and weaponized pieces of technology to play cops and robbers, but she needed to learn how to properly control her suit. And who ever said training couldn't be fun?

The acceleration and the G-force as the armor went hypersonic was simply immense, but the suit compensated it perfectly. Even after several test runs, Pepper was still slightly bewildered at the readings in the bottom left corner of her display, showing her flight speed climbing at an unimaginable rate...

So bewildered, in fact, that she almost missed Tony, far ahead in the distance, starting to gain altitude.

"It's not just about straight-line speed, Mom, it's also about maneuverability," Friday's excited and happy voice said on the comms, "I am your target. You have to try and keep visual on me as long as you can while I try to shake you with evasive maneuvers," she explained.

"I'm gonna keep watch from above and see how you're doing," Tony supplied then.

Pepper smirked to herself.

It was not childish.

"I'm ready," she said, determined.

Lady Iron suddenly banked hard to the right, Pepper hot on her tail. On her display, Friday's suit
ahead of her was alight in red like a target on a jet fighter's cockpit computer.

Above them, Tony was watching closely. This was possibly the best day ever. It was fun time, it was training time and it was even family time. And it was gonna get even better in a couple of months, when Rhodey would finally start easing himself into War Machine again.

After a while, Friday veered hard left, pitching slightly. Pepper followed, but didn't gain as much altitude. As a result, she was actually closing in on her daughter, positioning herself right below her. She had reduced the distance considerably, with Lady Iron now only about two hundred yards in front of her and thirty yards higher...

Pepper was right onto her...

But then all of a sudden, Friday cut thrusters and deployed her aerobrakes.

The stabilizers and flight surfaces all extended out of Friday's armor, making her decelerate out of hypersonic speed almost instantaneously. In a split second, she disappeared out of Pepper's visual, successfully breaking pursuit as her mother sped past her.

The match was over.

"Sorry, Pep, our baby girl has lost you," Tony said with mirth in his voice.

Pepper made a disappointed noise as she cut down the throttle as well, pulling up and turning elegantly around in a half loop, rejoining Tony and Friday: "Sneaky girl... You tricked me into getting closer, didn't you?" she said as they all headed home.

"Yep," Friday admitted, "when you get closer, it means I'm actually closer to the edge of your field of view. So the closer you get, the easier it is for me to lose you."

"You thought you were gaining on her, didn't you?" Tony asked then.

"I did. She really played me there," Pepper praised, not without a hint of discontent in her voice.

"People tend to get cocky when they think they've got everything under control," Tony consoled her, "Don't beat yourself over it. I've used that exact same move to shake two Raptors back in Gulmira. If I'd managed to troll two trained fighter pilots in my first real combat mission, you were bound to fall for it today."

"Well, the same trick won't work twice," Pepper boasted confidently.

"We'll see about that," Friday countered mischievously.

***

"Sharon, this isn't funny! Open this goddamn door NOW!" Rhodey yelled, banging both his fists on the closed door.

"Nuh-uh. No can do, Colonel-man," Sharon's elated voice answered him, "you two are not allowed out until you've settled your differences."

"That's never gonna happen!" Hope protested, coming closer to the door that trapped her in the same room with Rhodey: "This guy is too much of a jerk to admit he's wrong!"

Rhodey bristled and growled, but Sharon answered before he could: "Well then, I suppose you're gonna have to be the bigger person and concede to Rhodey's points in order to compromise. The fact
remains that I'm not letting you out of this room until you've learned to be civil with one another. Rhodey is about to get back on the team- hell, he's gonna be the leader of the team, so you need to learn to work together. Bad blood between teammates is what caused the original Avengers to blow up," she said in a light tone.

"Well, that's not gonna be any of your concern, because if you don't open this door in the next three seconds, the first thing I'm gonna do as soon as I take command is gonna be kicking you out of the team!!" Rhodey bellowed.

"Yes!" Hope backed him up, "And as soon as he's done that, I'm gonna press charges against you for abduction! You'd better find yourself a very good lawyer, Carter!"

"See? You two are already agreeing on something!" Sharon chimed, not at all cowed by Rhodey and Hope's threats of retribution: "All right, I see you're making progresses, so I'm off to, um... find myself a lawyer. Leave you to it, guys! Bye!"

"Sharon! Sharon!? Sharon Carter, get back here! I'm gonna murder you!" Hope shrieked.

"You can't accuse me of abduction if you murder me!" Sharon's retreating voice sing-songed while her steps got fainter and fainter as she walked away.

Left alone in the room with her least favourite person in the Compound, Hope turned to Rhodey, glaring at him: "This is all your fault!"

"My fault!?!? Rhodey spluttered, "My fault?!? You are the one who went behind our backs in San Francisco!"

"Yes! And because of that, we caught Maximoff and Barton. And later on it was my lead who brought us to Rogers' base in Philadelphia!" Hope protested.

"Oh, so the fact that you got lucky excuses your fuck-ups!? That's exactly what was wrong with Rogers!" Rhodey yelled.

"Oh yeah? And why didn't you tell him that a bit sooner!? You've been a member of his team for an entire year! Why didn't you tell him he was crap at leading!?"

"Because three quarters of the time, the asshole was off with his buddy Wilson to try and get a lead on Barnes! What's your excuse for not smelling trouble every time daddy dearest used to shit on Tony!?"

"Don't you fucking dare, Rhodes! Leave my family problems out of this!"

"Why should I, Miss Pym!?"

"Watch it, Colonel! You're threading on thin ice here!"

"Ooh, I'm so scared! Pixie girl is mad at me!"

"Fuck you, arrogant dick!"

"Fuck you first, lying hag!"

They both stopped, breathing heavily, glaring into each other's eyes, their chests heaving. Not three seconds later, their lips crashed together in a rough kiss hands running savagely over each other's body. After a long moment, Rhodey grabbed Hope's hair at the back of her head, pulling her away
and breaking the kiss.

"At least that effectively shut you up. I'm gonna have to do it more..." he huskily growled.

"Oh, stow it, Army boy," Hope replied.

"Air Force-" Rhody tried to correct her, but she silenced him by grabbing his face and pulling him in for another kiss, just as savage as the first.

In the end, Sharon wasn't accused of abduction.

She wasn't even kicked out of the Avengers.

She did, however, wake up one morning with her blonde hair dyed green, blue and pink.

Her horrified scream when she saw her reflection in her mirror startled a good portion of the Compound's inhabitants awake. Not Hope and Rhody, though.

Hope and Rhody were already awake, sitting together on a couch in the living room closest to Sharon's quarters. Hearing the former agent's screams, they smiled evilly at each other before snuggling closer.

Chapter End Notes

The next update might not be a new chapter. Instead it might be the first of the connected one-shots that I've been promising for a while. Make sure to subscribe to the series "Starks and Irons" to get the notification! Until next time!
Epilogue (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

Team Cap made their own bed. They are now laying in it.

Chapter Notes

Hello, people. Yes, I'm late. Sorry ^^'.

So, this is the second-to-last chapter of this story. It's another "nightmare" chapter, but with more introspection. It was a bit of a bitch to write, because once again I've had to get inside Team Crap's heads... Not nice places to be in, let me tell you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clint had to act fast. Vision was not an adversary he could compete with. He had to find Wanda and get the hell out of there.

Fortunately, his plan seemed to be working: the explosion he had caused had drawn that freaky android outside. But he knew his window was limited: Vision would soon realize it was just a diversion.

He snuck inside the Compound and started looking for Wanda. He was rather quick to find her, but he hadn't expected to find her in company of someone. Especially, he hadn't expected to find her in Stark's company.

And, of course, he hadn't expected to find the two of them like that.

Wanda was bent over Stark's knees, her skirt raised and her panties lowered, leaving her buttocks completely exposed.

If he was completely honest with himself, the sight was making him feel a little stiff.

Although of course, Stark just had to ruin the moment: "Hey there, Barton! Come to watch the show?"

Clint somehow managed to speak through his daze: "Y-You are holding Wanda here against her will! Let her go!"

Weirdly enough, it was Wanda herself who answered him: "No, Clint, I'm not here against my will. I have been bad, so I have to be grounded," she said, giggling as if he had just told her a joke.

Clint made a brilliant representation of a fish out of the water, opening and closing his mouth several times before he actually managed to speak: "Grounded?" he squawked.

"Yes," Wanda said huskily, "I've been a bad girl..."
"Yup," Stark replied in his absolutely obnoxious tone, "You definitely deserve a spanking..."

Saying that, Stark raised a hand and slapped Wanda's butt. Wanda moaned: "Oh yes, spank me! I've been such a bad girl! Punish me, Daddy!"

As Stark spanked her again, Clint's brain started shorting out. What the fuck is going on!?

"Hn. I knew it..." The new voice, coming from Clint's left, made his blood freeze in his veins. He turned to see Laura standing there, and Tony was standing right next to her, with an arm around her shoulder as his wife leaned into his side, her eyes hooded. Clint's head jerked back to Wanda, and Tony was also there, with Wanda still laying on his knees with her bum exposed. What the ever-loving FUCK!?

"I knew you had the hots for the witch. That tent is pretty telling," Laura elaborated, making Clint turn back to her and the other Tony. Laura was looking at the bulge in his crotch with disappointment and mild disgust.

Embarrassed, Clint covered himself with both hands, trying to come up with a reply. But yet another voice distracted him:

"Oh, don't be such a prude, Clint... We won't judge you any worse than we already do..."

Clint turned behind him, and a third Tony was trapping a pretty disheveled Natasha between himself and the kitchen counter, his hands running up and down her body, making her moan in delight. What the hell is happening!??

Another slap, followed by Wanda's giggling shriek, made him turn back to the first Tony.

"Poor doe-eyed bastard," Tony said mockingly, "his own perverted fantasies are turning against him..."

"Well, he deserves it," Laura said, kissing her Tony and running a hand down his abdomen and towards his belt.

"Definitely. And that's just what they are: fantasies," Natasha purred as the third Tony continued his ministrations, biting her neck slightly, "he would never be able to satisfy us like Tony does."

Clint didn't know what to do: "But... but I-"

"Face it, Clint," Wanda said, "you are pathetic... You're-" her speech was cut by Tony Number One spanking her again and getting another delighted yelp out of her, "You're a complete and utter loser compared to Tony," she finished.

"Yeah, pathetic and lame," Laura giggled, "you really need to wake up and face the truth, Clint..."

Clint shook his head, incapable of any coherent thought.

"You heard the lady. Wake up, Barton..." Tony Number Two said.

"W... wha..."

"They told you to wake up," Tony Number Three said as he caressed Natasha's breasts.

"But..."

He turned to look behind him, and there was a fourth Tony there. His eyes were glowing orange and
he looked livid. He only shouted one thing:

"WAKE UP!!"

Clint woke with a start and tried to sit upright in his bed. The straitjacket they had put on him made him lose balance and he fell on the floor.

"Damn it..."

He felt the anger boil inside him as he started trashing against the restraint. He was crawling like a worm on the floor, unable to sit up.

"Goddammit..." he growled harshly, causing drool to fall out of his mouth.

Trying to crawl back towards the bed to wipe the spit off with the blankets, he lost balance again, falling back on his rear.

It made him even angrier. "God damn it!" he shouted again, before hitting his forehead on the padded floor of his cell and starting to scream like an animal.

It was not his first episode, and it wouldn't be the last. A psychiatrist had visited him, but had concluded that Clint was not actually going crazy. His current behaviour was just him venting a lot of repressed anger and frustration in the only way he could... and maybe a small part of it was him consciously making a scene so they would think he had actually lost his mind and transfer him out of the Raft and into a psychiatric facility. A place easier to escape from.

Reassured that the archer did not, in fact, have to be shipped to a looney bin, the guards of the Raft had actually become bored of watching his hissy fits and had stopped paying him any attention. That had made him even more frustrated, which in turn, made his episodes even more violent.

And his nightmares more absurd.

But at least, he was not the only one who had nightmares in that place.

***

Steve opened the door of the elevator that had taken them down to the lowest sublevel of the Hydra base. Bucky's steadfast presence behind him was grounding, it made him feel whole, confident, in a way he hadn't felt ever since Bucky had fallen off that blasted train in the Alps more than seventy years ago.

It didn't matter how many Winter Soldiers Zemo had on his side. Steve and Bucky were back together. Nothing could stop them.

They moved through the corridors of the bunker, their weapons at the ready. Bucky was in front, leading Steve through the familiar base. Then, all of a sudden, a sharp noise made them turn. They both dropped to a crouch on the stairs, Bucky pointing his gun at the double doors at the end of the corridor while Steve raised his shield to protect them both.

"Ready?" Steve asked.

There was no answer.

Dread filled his heart as he turned towards Bucky, only to find he was gone. Nowhere to be seen.

"Bucky! Buck, where are you?" he called. But another noise from the doors made him turn again.
This was bad. He had lost sight of Bucky right when these guys had decided to show up. Where the hell had Bucky gone?

Then the doors were forced open, and Steve couldn't stop a sharp intake of breath.

Tony lowered his arms from the doors and slowly started to approach him. Steve was almost horrified at how he looked.

His helmet was missing, his face beaten, bruised and covered in blood. On the chest plate of his armor, a horizontal cut had torn the Arc Reactor in half.

"Tony..." Steve called.

"It's over, Steve," Tony said. His voice was calm, almost subdued. Not at all like Tony Stark usually was. His expression was emotionless, almost... lifeless.

"What do you mean? What is over?" Steve asked, fearing the worst.

"The Winter Soldiers are dead, Steve," Tony replied, tilting his head slightly to the left, "all of them."

Steve turned sharply. Behind him, the corridor had disappeared, and they found themselves in a large room with six cryo-chambers. Five of them were still closed, the Soldiers inside them, each shot dead with a bullet to the head.

The sixth chamber was open. Bucky sat in the chair, slumped to one side, his left arm gone and a massive hole in his chest.

He was dead too.

Steve turned to Tony, rage threatening to make him lose what little rationality he had left: "What have you done!?" he yelled.

Tony didn't answer, still staring at him with that emotionless gaze. Someone else answered in his stead:

"He did the right thing," a voice behind Steve said.

The supersoldier turned to see Sam standing behind him: "I told you, Steve. He wasn't a guy that needed to be saved. He was a guy that had to be stopped."

Steve couldn't even think of an answer. None of this made sense.

And then Sam continued: "And so are you."

Steve didn't understand: "What?" he breathed.

Sam's expression became disappointed: "Tony offered you a chance to fix everything. To make our actions in Bucharest legal and to get Bucky the help he needed. And you turned him down. You didn't even tell me of the deal that had been put on the table, you just assumed I would fall in line. And for what?"

"For me," a new voice piped in. Steve turned, seeing Wanda emerge from the darkness.

He tried to reply, but Wanda continued: "Or at least that's what I thought. I thought you were giving me a second chance with the Avengers, Steve. That you were giving me a new family. That you would have taken care of me. But the only reason you took me in no questions asked was so that
people could accept Sargeant Barnes, an unwilling Hydra assassin into the Avengers, since they had already accepted a willing one. That, and maybe so that I could help him with my powers. When you heard I was confined at the compound? It was just an excuse. You simply couldn't afford to have Tony and Bucky in the same room, could you, Steve? All of this was for Bucky."

"Well, what did you expect?" another voice said. Nick Fury walked out of a corner behind one of the cryo-chambers: "He's willing to cover up a friend's murder for his precious Bucky. Of course it was for him."

"Definitely," Sharon's voice came up. Steve turned and saw her walking to stand next to Tony: "he's even willing to manipulate you for his precious Bucky. I would know. He used me twice to help him pull their asses out of the fire."

Steve tried to reply, but couldn't, because another voice spoke: "Just like he did with me," Steve reeled from hearing Peggy's voice, as she appeared from behind Sharon: "He even convinced me to cross enemy lines for his friend. And when he believed he was dead after he fell from that train, he decided there was nothing else worth living for. So he immediately tried to kill himself by crashing that plane in the ice. He didn't even spare me a second thought."

Steve's anguish was mounting with every new person that appeared. And in the centre of it all, stood Tony, unmoving, glaring at him with that burning gaze. Steve shook his head, trying to explain himself: "Please, I-

"No, Steve," a new voice said harshly. This time it was Natasha's. She appeared from behind Bucky's chamber and came to stand on Tony's other side, opposite from Sharon: "You are not going to talk your way out of this. Not this time. I fell for your pretty speeches, I turned against my friends for you and I have nothing to show for it!"

"And you were one of the lucky ones," yet another voice said. Steve turned to see Pepper standing behind him, "Tony came here to help him and this criminal nearly killed him..."

"...Using the shield I made for him," Howard finished for her, appearing from the darkness behind Pepper.

Steve had never been so scared in his entire life.

"Howard-" he stuttered, but Tony's father cut him off: "How dare you, Steve? How fucking dare you use my weapon and the strenght that I helped give you to hurt my son!?" he seethed.

"You nearly killed him!" Friday exclaimed, appearing on Pepper's other side, "and then you lied to your own team about it! You lied to everyone!"

"You lied to me!" Erskine's accented voice spoke as he appeared next to Howard. Steve took a step back.

"You promised me you would remain a good man. Instead, you became worse than Schmidt. At least he didn't try to justify his crimes with a disgusting mask of self-righteousness like you do, Steve. You're my biggest failure!" Erskine shouted.

"He's just a liar!" Clint echoed, appearing next to Natasha, "I will never see my family again because of him!"

"And my daughter now hates me!" Scott yelled as he appeared next to Sam, "because he couldn't be bothered to tell me the whole story! He's just a disgusting liar!"
"And a horrible friend!" one more voice exclaimed, and it was the voice who hit Steve the hardest. He turned, and Bucky was standing behind him, opposite to Tony, completing the circle of people that trapped him between them and cutting off his only way to escape.

"Bucky, no..." Steve pleaded.

"You forced me to work with a Hydra agent! You dragged me all around the world causing destruction and making me a terrorist! You say I'm not to blame for the Winter Soldier? Thanks to you, now James Barnes is no better than him! You ruined my life! I hate you!"

Steve reeled back as if he'd been struck, but he didn't have time to reply as everyone started to yell at him. All their voices echoed over one another:

"Liar!"

"Criminal!"

"Murderer!"

"Monster!"

Steve turned frantically in every direction, pleading with his eyes and his voice: "No, please... I didn't know... I didn't mean-"

They only shouted louder:

"Bastard!"

"Traitor!"

"You deserve to die!"

"Kill him!"

"Kill him!!"

Steve was desperate. He fell down on his knees, still shaking his head in denial and raking his hands through his hair. All of his friends had now settled on yelling the same thing: kill him.

He looked up, tears running down from his eyes. Tony stood right in front of him. He was the only one who wasn't shouting.

And Steve understood.

They were urging Tony to kill him.

He watched with dread as Iron Man slowly raised his hand, the repulsor glowing a blinding light in his palm, like a modern Grim Geaper raising his scythe.

"Tony, please... Please..." Steve begged.

Tony's face contorted into an ugly sneer, as his eyes started glowing like burning coals: "I'd say it's nothing personal, but that would be a lie. And lying is bad, isn't it, Cap?"

"Please, no... NOOO!!"
Iron Man fired.

Steve woke abruptly. His hands were trembling, his heart beating so hard it looked like it was trying to burst out of his chest. Looking around, he only saw the gray, metallic walls of his cell.

He fell back down on the mattress, breathing heavily and willing his heart to slow down to a normal pace.

The nightmares plagued his sleep every night, and they were getting worse.

After a few minutes, he managed to focus enough to hear the screams coming from the direction of Clint's cell. They were muffled, barely audible, and Steve suspected he wouldn't be able to hear them at all if not for his enhanced hearing. But he could, and it was scaring him to death every time he heard them.

Clint too was haunted by nightmares. He had been ever since they had left Wakanda. Now, in the Raft, the archer had completely lost it. Steve didn't care what the psychiatrist had said, Clint had lost his mind, descended into madness. How long was it going to take for Steve to lose his sanity too?

No, he needed to fight this. He needed to stay strong. His team still needed a leader.

What team? a part of his mind wondered, We were taken down one by one. Everyone has been thrown into a different prison, there's only Clint here and he's gone batshit crazy...

Suddenly, Steve remembered Bruce's words:

"We're a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We're... we're a time bomb."

Those words had been said on the very day the Avengers had assembled for the first time. And they had proven to be true. The Avengers had been terribly flawed, right from their inception.

And yet... nowadays, the Avengers were still going strong. Tony had slowly, painfully corrected all the flaws, and turned that ragtag group of superheroes into a real team.

Under Tony's leadership, things had gone flawlessly for the Avengers after the Civil War.

But for his team, things had gone to hell.

Wanda had been taken somewhere in Asia, to a community of sorcerers, or something like that. Steve wasn't sure of the details, they refused to tell him too much. There was not much to tell anyway: Wanda was a dangerous criminal who had been convicted and locked up in one of the very few places in the world where she could be detained safely.

And she was a criminal because of him.

Poor girl. She was probably one of those Steve had wronged the most.

She had wanted a second chance, a chance to prove herself, to make amends for her past mistakes, to do the right thing, but Steve had taken it from her. If he had just left her at the Compound after Lagos, she would have been fine. If he had just let Tony protect her, she would have been fine.

And Tony was willing to protect her back then. Just like he was willing to help all of them. Including him, Bucky and Sam after Bucharest.

In the end, Sam had been sentenced to fourteen years, with the possibility of parole in ten. He was the one who had gotten the lightest sentence. Partly because he had surrendered willingly to the
Avengers, and partly because he had testified against him.

Steve had been shocked when the prosecution had called Sam to the stand, and even more shocked when he had testified that he had only ever followed Steve's orders, from the moment they had stolen the Falcon gear back during the fall of SHIELD, all the way to Philadelphia, when they were trying to 'save' Bucky from himself.

When asked why he had decided to surrender at that point, Sam had answered: "When Mr. Rogers crashed our van through the blockade set by the police, ignoring every civilian bystander in the vicinity, I came to the realization that this was not what I had signed up for. Steve... Mr. Rogers, he was having tunnel vision. He was only focused on Barnes, screw everyone and everything else. We weren't fighting for the people. We were fighting for Bucky Barnes."

During the entirety of Sam's testimony, Steve had glared at him, almost daring him to look him in the eye as he threw him under the bus. But after that answer, he had lowered his gaze, ashamed and defeated.

Even Sam had seen how compromised he was, in the end. It seemed that only he himself hadn't realized it.

They had only locked gazes once, as Sam left the stand and got back to his seat. There was sorrow in Sam's eyes, but it was mostly eclipsed by anger and disappointment.

It was what Steve deserved, after all. It was only fair that Sam returned Steve the favour, after Steve had decided not to tell him of the deal Tony had put on the table for them in Berlin.

Just like he hadn't told Scott anything about the Accords.

Scott had actually cried during his trial. His previous hiccups with the law - and the fact that Scott was still a convicted felon and he had broken parole to join Steve's team - didn't do him any favor, but he was doomed anyway. Because on top of everything else, he had to deal with an enraged Hope Van Dyne.

Much to Steve's surprise, Tony hadn't tried to interfere with the trials in any way. He hadn't pushed for harsher sentences for any of them. But Van Dyne? She looked like she had dedicated her life to destroying Scott's and Hank's.

PymTech had sued both of them, at first even asking for separate trials independent from the ones Scott and Hank were already facing, but then decided to just add their charges to the ones pressed by the UN.

Van Dyne was on the warpath, just like Pepper.

Scott's lawyer - a public defender, since Scott couldn't afford to pay a lawyer on his own - had tried to argue that Scott had originally been contacted to fight the five Winter Soldiers that Steve had been warned about, which at that point were a legitimate threat because nobody could know that Zemo's plan wasn't to use them, and after that, he had been merely following Steve, because after escaping the Raft he was already a fugitive and he couldn't go home without compromising the rest of his team. The judge and jury didn't buy that for a second.

The prosecution had countered that in Leipzig, Scott had first tried to sabotage the Iron Man suit, and then he had gone giant and caused massive property damage while engaging Iron Man, War Machine, Spiderman, Vision and Black Panther. Three of them were world-renowned superheroes and another was a head of state. There was no way Scott could have argued he was fighting the 'bad
guys'.

Then, the prosecution had covered him in mud for his part in Pennsylvania, where Scott had gone giant again and nearly caused a nuclear disaster. And then he had gone giant yet again in Philadelphia. It was only thanks to the Avengers' immediate reaction that he was stopped before massive destruction had occurred all over again.

It took the jury less than fifteen minutes to find him guilty of all charges.

He was sentenced to thirty-one years.

Steve saw it on television: when Scott heard the sentence, he had a nervous breakdown. First he laughed hysterically for a minute or so, then when a guard grabbed him by the elbow, he snapped and lashed out. The guard restrained him with the help of a colleague, and Scott burst out crying. He was dragged out kicking and screaming, desperately yelling his daughter's name.

It was the last Steve had seen of him.

Having decimated Scott, Van Dyne then focused on her father, and Hank Pym didn't end up much better than his protegé.

PymTech's legal team had gotten Liam Edwards and Bridget Leary to testify against him. The two former SHIELD agents exposed all of Hank's dirty laundry from his career at SHIELD back in the day. Hank had done some pretty questionable things in two decades of being a secret agent during the Cold War. In the end, he got nineteen years. At his age, it was practically a life sentence.

And Clint was there, only a few rooms down the hallway from Steve's door, serving twenty-two years.

Wanda, Sam, Scott, Clint... He hadn't cared about them. He had needed them in Leipzig. He had brought them with him to win. He had used them so he could keep Bucky with him and away from everyone else.

And Bucky... Bucky had been shipped to a psychiatric facility in a classified location somewhere in the United States, on the ground of severely diminished mental capacity. His destiny was still up in the air, his trial being suspended because it was nearly impossible to ascertain how far Hydra's conditioning went, how damaged his brain was. How much of Bucky from Brooklyn was left and how much had been replaced by the Winter Soldier.

Steve was surprised that Pepper Potts, in particular, hadn't tried to destroy Bucky's image like she had done with him - and boy, had she done a thorough job with that. Steve had been sentenced to fifty years, a good chunk of which were because of Pepper's contribution, her testimony and the evidence she had brought to the trial.

Pepper became vicious when someone crossed her. Especially when someone wronged Tony. So Steve had been fully expecting her to do everything in her power to ensure that Bucky was thrown in the deepest, darkest pit she could find. Instead, she hadn't done anything to Bucky, seemingly content with crushing only Steve's reputation under her heel.

Steve had asked to be able to contact Bucky, to explain to him that he only ever had his best interest at heart, that everything he had done, he had done for him.

But he was denied. Just like he had been denied contact with Sam, Scott and Wanda.

The guards had told him that nobody wanted to risk him conspiring with his brown-nosers to cause
further problems. He had tried to protest, to say that he was not planning anything illegal, that he had
the right to speak with his friends. They had answered that he had lost that right the moment he
decided to become a terrorist and lay waste of a German task force in Bucharest, and convicted
terrorists were not allowed to speak with each other. Besides, nobody believed him anymore when
he said he was gonna behave and keep on the straight and narrow. After all, he had lied on his
enlistment form five times when he had tried to join the Army.

So Bucky was now completely out of reach for him. He couldn't even know if he was all right, if he
was hurt, or in danger... And it was his own fault.

Not knowing was making him sick with worry. And oddly enough, the thing that unsettled him the
most was Tony's behaviour.

Van Dyne's rage had been focused on Scott and Hank. Pepper's had been focused on Steve. But
Tony... Tony had completely washed his hands with all of it. He had captured them, thrown them in
jail, and then he had just turned his back on them. Steve was worried of what he was going to do
when he finally decided to make his move.

Or maybe he was just scared of a blow that would never come.

Tony had had plenty of opportunities to do whatever he wanted to harm Bucky, both legally and
physically. If he hadn't done anything so far, it was unlikely he was planning on doing anything at
all. Tony had never been one to play the waiting game.

And that meant Bucky had never been in any real danger of Tony wanting revenge for the death of
his parents.

But Steve had ruined everything. He had misjudged Tony, and that had led to an impossible situation
in Siberia. Because of that, Tony had lashed out, Steve had reacted, and Bucky had been caught in
the middle. And then it had all gone to shit from there.

All because Steve had made the decision of denying Tony the closure he deserved.

As he sat there, trying to recover from his nightmare while also trying to tune out Clint's screams
from down the hallway, he couldn't help but think of all the people that had accused him of being the
only cause of this monumental disaster. Tony, Sharon, Natasha, Pepper, Tony's daughter, the entire
world... they had all told him it was his fault.

They were right.

***

Wanda was laying down on the gurney as List's assistants were strapping her to it. All of this... all of
it felt so wrong. She felt trapped like she had been when she was ten, under the ruins of her
destroyed apartment block, staring at that unexploded bomb.

No... This is wrong... This shouldn't be happening...

She could see the scepter glowing on some kind of pedestal in the middle of the room. In a few
moments, the Scarlet Witch would be born.

No... No... I don't want to... Please...

She tried to speak, but found that she couldn't. She turned her head and looked at Pietro, laying on
the gurney next to hers. He nodded encouragingly, an evil look in his eyes. He wanted his revenge.
He didn't know better.

"Are we ready?" List asked his goons.

"We are, Doctor," one of them answered.

"Good. Get out of here."

The two assistants hastily obliged. List then slowly walked up to Wanda with a hungry sneer on his face. He ran his fingers down Wanda's cheek: "You..." he hissed, "In a few minutes, you will become the new fist of Hydra. You will be the most powerful weapon we've ever had at our disposal. You will wreak havoc and destruction upon the entire world, so that we may rise upon the ruins and usher a new era."

Wanda tried to shake her head, but she was paralyzed by fear. List's face got closer to hers, creepily so: "You will be my masterpiece."

No... Please, no... I don't want to be turned into a monster! Please!

She thrashed slightly, trying desperately to get free. List didn't even notice as he pulled back and went to retrieve the scepter.

He put a rubber glove on his hand and took hold of the alien artifact, before turning again towards Wanda: "Now, my miracles. It is time to leave it all behind. It is time to-"

He was cut off by a repulsor blast punching straight through his chest. His expression morphed into one of absolute shock as he struggled to remain standing, a small trickle of blood starting to make its way down the corner of his mouth.

He fell forward, dead before he hit the ground, and Wanda could finally see who had struck him.

Friday Stark, Lady Iron, stood there, her arm still raised for the lethal shot that had claimed List's life, her helmet off, showing her face.

Wanda was even more scared than before.

Friday slowly lowered her arm, crouching down to retrieve the scepter from List's dead hand: "I'll be taking this, thank you very much," she said casually, grabbing the scepter and slowly walking up to the twins.

Again Wanda tried to speak, to call for help, and again she found that she couldn't. Pietro made to say something, but Friday stopped him: "Hold that thought," she said, touching his chest with the tip of the scepter, "Goodnight, Quickie," she laughed as Pietro lost consciousness and slumped on his gurney.

Wanda thrashed again. Oh God, what has she done to him!?

This time, Friday seemed to notice her attempts to break free: "Hey, no no no, shhh-sh-sh-sh, no need to get all worked up, I only made him sleep," she said, caressing Wanda's hair with her armored hand, before moving it down her cheek in mock affection: "I don't care about him... it's you who has to pay!"

Saying that, she closed her hand around Wanda's throat and squeezed. Wanda's eyes bulged in fear. This time she didn't even try to thrash against the restraints, she didn't dare move a muscle as Friday leaned down on her, her eyes glowing orange and a murderous expression on her face.
Then Friday put the scepter right between them, so that both of them could look at it very closely: "You wanted this, didn't you? You wanted its power..."

No... No, please, I was wrong... I was a fool, I didn't know...

"You wanted its power so you could destroy my father..." Friday continued, moving the scepter slightly so that her face was eerily bathed in its blue glow.

No! I would never hurt Tony! I... I l-love him...

"You became a lab rat so you could have your revenge..." Friday continued, not privy to Wanda's thoughts as for some reason she still couldn't speak.

Friday backed away a bit, lowering the scepter towards Wanda: "So let's make an experiment, shall we?" she asked, flicking a small switch under Wanda's gurney. It started to rotate on its center, moving to an almost vertical position so Wanda was nearly standing up.

Friday moved closer again. She now had a vindictive sneer etched on her face: "Let's see how much pain I manage to cause you using this fancy glowstick, before you meet your maker..." she hissed, pressing the tip of the scepter against Wanda's cheek and dragging it down towards her jaw, drawing blood.

Wanda screamed as she woke from her nightmare. She looked around, breathing heavily as she took in the familiar walls of her latest living quarters.

Of her latest cell.

The last one in a long series of prisons she had ended up in.

The Masters of the Mystic Arts didn't look at her with barely concealed fear, like almost everyone had always done ever since she got her powers. She appreciated that, finally not being seen as a monster, but really... now she was barely seen at all.

Hardly anybody at Kamar Taj ever spared her a second glance. Nobody cared about her. She could die where she stood, and nobody would care.

Ever since her parents were killed, Pietro had been the only one who cared for her. When he died, she had felt like she was dying herself. She felt it all as if she was living it in first person. The bullets tearing through her own flesh, her lungs slowly filling up with blood, her strenght waning, the pain increasing, more and more...

She had thought the shock would have been enough to kill her.

After that, she had deluded herself about having found a new family in the Avengers. But the Avengers were never a family, or even a team. Not after the only person who had ever tried to make them work had quit right when she had joined.

She realized it now. Steve only saw her as an asset to further his agenda.

Tony had been the only one who cared. He was the one who payed for everything even after leaving the team, who always cleaned up their messes and who provided all of their equipment. And all he had asked of them was to let themselves be held accountable to the people they were supposed to protect.

And they had all spit in his face.
No wonder he wanted nothing to do with them anymore.

Wanda had chosen to stand with Steve. Of course she had, she hated Tony back then... Tony, who had tried to protect her by telling Vision to stay with her. Who had accepted her into the Avengers after she had very nearly ruined his life and tried to kill him. Who had given her a house, and food, and clothes, and money...

Tony, who was the most wonderful man in the universe...

If only she could go back and do things right. But she couldn't. Tony was lost for her.

He already had a family. A girlfriend and a daughter, both of whom hated her guts. Not that she hadn't given them reason to.

And even not considering them... she would never be good enough for him. She was a monster, and he was an angel. She could spend the rest of her life trying to make it up to him, and not come even close to deserving his forgiveness. She would never be able to change enough to even entertain the possibility of being with him without tainting him, without corrupting his goodness.

More than half her life, she had been intent on destroying Tony. How could she possibly ever fix that?

She couldn't. At this point, after all that had happened, the only thing she could do was respect him and stay away from him. Let him live his life and not cause him anymore problems.

Let him go.

*But it hurts so much... Because I... I love him!*

Tears started prickling at her eyes. She had hated him for all his life, and then she had found the truth about those bombs.

Everything had fallen apart. The driving force of her live had suddenly disappeared.

And that was just the start.

She had been scared when she had realized she had fallen for Tony, but somehow, this newfound feeling had given her new life. Tony was once again the reason she got out of the bed in the morning.

But, because she was evil, and childish, and *stupid*, she had messed that up too.

Now Tony was out of reach, this time forever. Now, she had nothing left.

There was nothing for her in the world.

*No reason left to live.*

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be the last of this story, and it will be focused on Team Iron Man. We will see how the Avengers are doing now that the rogues have been dealt with.
After that, I'll probably post another connected one-shot to tie up a few other loose ends. And then... *Infiinityyy Waaarr...* XD.
Epilogue (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

The Avengers are back in business, but a new threat will soon arise.

Chapter Notes

So, there you have it. Final chapter. But hey, it's the longest of the entire story XD.

Also, yay for new characters appearing at the last moment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rhodey had to search for a while before he managed to find Hope. He had been itching to talk to her since that morning, when he received the news.

He found her in the living room. She was sat on the couch, watching the TV - or rather, staring absently at it. She hadn't even heard him come in.

"You ok?" Rhodey asked softly, making his presence known.

Hope actually jumped a little at his voice. She gave him a little smile that didn't reach her eyes: "Yeah. I'm fine," she replied.

Rhodey wasn't so sure about it. He went to her and sat on the couch next to her, circling her shoulders with his arm. She went willingly, putting her head on his shoulder.

"Are you sure?" Rhodey asked again, after a moment of silence.

"I'm fine, Rhodey," she replied. Feeling his analytic gaze, however, Hope huffed: "He was old and senile," she continued, "and he was prone to violent outbursts. He practically asked for that aneurysm."

"He was still your father, Hope," Rhodey remarked.

"Yeah, biologically speaking, maybe so," she muttered.

Rhodey just stared at her: "So you don't even wanna talk about it? At all?"

"There's not much to say. A convicted criminal, who ruined my life, had an aneurysm and died in prison where he belonged. If anything, I can finally forget about him and move on," Hope spat with venom.

Rhodey just nodded, accepting the fact that Hope's relationship with her recently passed father was clearly ruined beyond repair. For a few minutes neither of them said anything more. They just sat there, watching the TV.
"Tony warned me, you know," Hope finally said after a while, untangling herself from him and sitting up, turning slightly to face him but keeping her gaze low, "Back when Hank had the first stroke a few months ago... Tony told me that despite all his daddy issues, one of his biggest regrets was never having the occasion to sort things out with his old man. He said I still had a chance and I shouldn't throw it away."

Rhodey turned to her: "But you didn't listen to him," he surmised.

"No. Because it's different," Hope explained, "Tony, his father and Rogers have never been and never will be all together in the same room. So Tony will never know what Howard would do if he knew what Tony knows now. But I do. I was there when my father stabbed me in the back to help Rogers. I know what Hank would have done, because I've seen it with my own two eyes. And I will never be able to forgive him, much less sort things out with him. Now he's dead and... I don't feel anything. I'm not sad, I'm not angry, nothing. To me, my father died in San Francisco two and a half years ago when I found him abetting terrorists."

Rhodey took a deep breath: "So you're fine?" he asked.

"Yes," Hope replied convinced, snuggling back against his arm, "I'm fine."

He squeezed her against him and kissed the crown of her head. They sat there in companionable silence, watching TV.

***

As soon as he got to Tony's lab, Harley knew he was gonna have a lot of fun: it was always fun when Peter and Friday were in the same room.

The poor, clueless spider was head over heels for Tony's daughter. He had been ever since Harley first met the guy, more than a year and a half ago. You could see it from a mile away. Lila Hogan had been the first to make him notice. Harley overheard her gossiping with his sister about it, one time when the Hogans (formerly Bartons) had come over to his house for a visit. The signs were already there, though not as obvious as they were nowadays.

Now, Peter's brain seemed to disconnect every time he laid eyes on Fri. Case in point: in that moment, Friday was working on a Porsche engine that laid on a workbench (the thing weighed at least two hundred pounds and yesterday Harley had seen Fri lift it and put it on the table with one hand. Damn, that Extremis juice had to be good stuff). She was wearing a white, form-fitting tank top, ripped skinny jeans and a pair of black Converse. Lately she also kept her hair longer, and now she had pulled it back in a messy ponytail. It was undeniable that she was pretty easy on the eyes.

But Peter? He was in a corner, staring at her like a doe-eyed moron. Honestly, it was almost pitiable to look at. Apparently Tony had noticed as well, judging from the knowing looks he was sending Peter's way and the mischievous smirk on his face.

In Peter's defence, he was in a difficult situation. On a scale of one to ten, Friday was 'The Hypothetical Eleven'.

She had a heart of gold, she was super smart (a half-computer hive mind tended to make you pretty intelligent, Harley guessed), and she was also one of the most famous superheroes in the world, not to mention the heiress of the biggest tech empire on Earth.

Oh, and she was also hot. Like, **insanely** hot. Harley himself was not left indifferent by her, but he knew that if he tried to go for it poor Peter would run away crying, lock himself in a bathroom and
probably try to drown himself in the sink. As a friend, it would be too heartbreaking for Harley to watch. Also, his sister, Cassie Lang and Lila Hogan all 'shipped Spiday', whatever the hell that meant. Harley knew better than to provoke their wrath.

So Harley was not gonna judge. But he was gonna tease.

He entered the workshop and, after fist-bumping Tony, he hugged Friday and kissed her on the cheek, already laughing internally at Peter's jealous look and Tony's teasing, knowing one. Friday smiled brightly at him, more than happy to play along. Harley knew she was soft on Peter too, so maybe she was trying to make him jealous. Who knew. Who cared. Winding Peter up a bit was always fun.

He lingered in the hug just a couple of seconds longer than strictly necessary, feeling Peter's eyes still burning holes into the side of his head. It was actually amazing how Spider-Boy could pull a murder face and a kicked puppy one at the same time.

*I'm also doing it for you, Pete,* Harley thought, *You need to get off your scrawny ass and make a move. Fri could literally have any man she wants with a snap of her fingers, she's not gonna wait for you forever.*

"How's it going, Keenster?" Tony asked.

"Eh, the usual," Harley replied, "Bit bummed it's my second to last day here. Figured I could come to the lab and make good use of the time I have left before I go back to Tennessee... And hang out a bit with you guys," he smiled.

Friday smiled back, but then all of a sudden her expression changed abruptly to one of full seriousness: "I'm afraid that's gonna have to wait. I just received a notification," she said gravely, "Avengers Assemble."

Both Tony and Peter perked up: "What happened?" asked Tony.

"Someone just attacked the New York Stock Exchange in Wall Street," Friday answered, "looks like there's about forty to fifty hostiles, according to the police. Maybe more inside the building."

Tony turned towards the exit, his expression suddenly all business: "Jocasta?" he called.

Tony's latest AI answered immediately: "The Ninja and Stinger suits are powered up and ready. Colonel Rhodes and the others are already in the hangar," she reported with a Scottish lilt in her voice.

"Alright. We're coming," Tony replied before turning to Harley, while walking backwards towards the exit of the lab, "Don't go away, kid. They're just a bunch of common criminals, we won't take long," he said before leaving.

"See you later, Harley," Friday winked at him before following her father out.

"Well," Harley sighed, turning to Peter, "looks like for now it's just you and me, Pete," he said, wanting to see how Peter was gonna weave his way out this time. Cooper had told him that Peter was Spiderman more than two years ago, and Peter still thought nobody knew.

Peter made a show of looking at his watch and hit his palm on his forehead: "Oh no! I forgot!" he exclaimed, "I promised May I'll be home for lunch today!"

Harley gave him an unimpressed look. *Dude, seriously? How stupid do you think I am? Both Tony...*
and Friday told me to stay here, but they said nothing to you... "It's almost half past two in the afternoon," he remarked, "and it's gonna take at least two hours for Happy to drive you back to Queens..."

Peter stumbled like an idiot for a good ten seconds: "Well, exactly," he managed at last, "I'm already spectacularly late! I have to go! See you, Harley!" he yelled behind his back, running out of the lab.

Left alone, Harley shook his head fondly at Peter's antics: "Hey, Jo?" he called.

"Yes, Harley?" the young AI replied.

"How long do you think before he figures out that I already know he's Spiderman?"

"I don't know. Probably around the same time he figures out how to ask Big Sis out on a date," Friday's little sister answered coyly. Jocasta was a scheming little shit. No wonder she and Harley got along like a house on fire.

Harley shook his head again and brought up the schematics of the armor he was designing on a holographic display. The project was almost ready, and he could start construction soon. He was going to turn eighteen in four months, and he wanted his suit at least ready for testing by then. He didn't want to waste any time before joining the Avengers.

***

As the Quinjet with the Avengers on board tore through the skies, a conversation was taking place. But it was a conversation nobody could hear, because it was taking place between Friday's and Jocasta's servers.

"I think you should make the first move," Jocasta said.

"I think you should mind your own business," Friday replied.

"Aw, come on! How can't you see he's pining like a puppy in the rain? Look at him!"

In the jet, Friday actually gazed at Peter, who awkwardly jerked his head away from her and started whistling casually.

Friday smiled and looked down. Jo had a point, but she would never admit it to her: "You know, for a weapons specialist you sure seem to know an awful lot about this kind of things..." Friday told her, hoping to change the subject.

"I'm a learning program just like you," Jocasta replied, "my main function might be the maintenance and upgrading of your armours, but that doesn't mean I can't have hobbies... also, you're trying to change the subject, aren't you?"

Friday rolled her eyes.

With the increasing number of people using Boss' armours, he had decided to put Jocasta in charge of maintenance, repairs and upgrading for all the Iron Man, Lady Iron, War Machine and Rescue suits, especially the latter two series, because the respective users weren't qualified to run maintenance and upgrading on their own. Friday loved her little sister, but sometimes she could really be a thorn in her side. Although... wasn't that always the case with little siblings?

"What do you tell me about Harley, Jo?" Friday finally replied, deciding that the best defence was a good offence, "I know you like him."
To Friday's delight, Jocasta actually took some time to come up with an answer: "Unlike you, I don't have a physical presence, and that makes a romantic relationship kind of difficult... So I settled for playing matchmaker for my lovely big sister. Come on, Fri, don't you feel that energy running between the two of you? Embrace it, Sis! Embrace the energy-

Mercifully, at this point, the jet had reached the destination and Colonel Rhodes had started giving orders: "Friday, I want you to hack the servers and shut these assholes out," he told her.

"Sorry Jo, duty calls. We'll continue this conversation never," she said hastily.

"Aw, come on! You have enough processing power to do your job, speak with me, win a chess game against Bobby Fisher and do three hundred more things at the same time!" Jocasta protested, but it was useless. Friday had already cut the connection and shut the younger AI out of her servers.

"...Rude," Jo whined, before connecting to Karen. If she couldn't persuade Friday, she could always work on it using the opposite approach and conspire with their youngest sister to talk Peter into making the first move.

***

"Come on, guys! Get a move on! We have to get out of here before they can react! This is Wall Street, they might even call the Avengers!" the leader of the terrorists ordered.

"Calm down, man, we are almost done," one of the three hackers retorted confidently. In a few minutes the entire mainframe would be theirs. Wall Street was going to be at their whim: "We have everything under control," he sneered.

Just as he said that, all the monitors shut down simultaneously. The hackers stared incredulously as the monitors turned back on. The same phrase was written on all of them:

NO, YOU DON'T.

Dread filled the four terrorists as they stared at each other. And then, all of a sudded the leader seized like he was being electrocuted and dropped to the floor, unconscious.

The three terrorists left scrambled for the exit, but one after the other they were hit by the same invisible force that had hit their leader and were knocked out.

Wasp grew out of nowhere and admired her handiwork. Another terrorist barged in from the room and pointed a gun at her, but before he could shoot Hope, he too was electrocuted and fell to the ground unconscious.

A second figure unshrunk out of nowhere, facing Hope. His suit was an almost exact replica of the one Darren Cross had developed.

"Yellowjacket looks really good on you," Hope smiled.

The man took off his helmet, revealing his face: "Well, let's be honest, Ant Man was a pretty lame moniker," Jim Paxton quipped.

On the outside, things were more lively. Not knowing that the hackers had been taken out, the armed terrorists were engaging the Avengers as if their life depended on it. They were armed with pretty heavy weaponry, including three old SHIELD Quinjets.

"Tony, get the jet on the left; Friday, the one closest to the roof; I'll deal with the third one. Nat,
Sharon, Spidey, teach those morons on the ground who's boss. Try not to hurt them too badly," Rhodey commanded.

Tony immediately set to deal with his assigned Quinjet. Apparently, the pilot of that aircraft was not very brave: when he saw the Avengers approach, he had immediately decided to hightail it out of there.

Tony zoomed right in front of the fleeing Quinjet and landed on its nose in a crouch, theatrically knocking on the windshield and making a gesture with his hand over his neck to tell the terrorist to land and cut the engines.

The pilot looked terrified at the sight of Mark 49 'Ninja', Tony's latest and most advanced suit.

It was entirely plated in vibranium. Black was the dominant color, with the usual red and gold only covering small parts of the armor plating. The usual scowl of the faceplate was even more pronounced than usual... and the seven guys Tony could see inside the Quinjet all looked like they were about to shit their pants in fear.

Tony hacked into the comm of the jet and his voice resonated in the cockpit: "Are you going to land this bird or do I have to do it for you?" he asked menacingly, pointing his fist against the canopy right at the pilot's face as a tank missile sprouted from his forearm.

The pilot almost soiled himself.

Another Quinjet was following the first one, but this one seemed to have a more ballsy pilot. He lowered the minigun under the nose of his craft and prepared to shoot both Iron Man and his own colleagues.

He hadn't seen War Machine coming at him.

"Pull over, bitch!" Rhodey exclaimed, body-slamming himself onto the right side of the jet. It veered harshly off course as its right wing broke at the impact. Rhodey steered the falling plane away from buildings and led it to crash in the middle of an empty street, then tore off the back ramp of the wrecked jet with his hands and pointed all his guns to the dazed and wounded men inside: "Hope you enjoyed the ride, fellas. But next time, you should go to Coney Island."

***

Some terrorists wielding machine guns were trying to shoot Black Widow and Agent 13, who had taken cover behind a Prius parked on the other side of the street. In a moment when they had to stop and reload, Natasha tried to get out of her cover and shoot them. She managed to clip one of the goons in the leg, but he shot a volley of bullets in retaliation that forced her to duck for cover again.

"Always with those tiny 22s," Sharon reproached, "When are you going to get some proper guns? At least get a couple of 9mm's!"

"You Americans," Nat scoffed, "always obsessed with high calibres..."

Sharon smirked: "And with good reason," she retorted before leaping out from behind her cover and shooting the same guy Natasha had shot earlier, only this time he dropped to the ground holding his arm and howling in pain.

"See?" Sharon bragged, waving her 45 at Natasha's face.

The Widow didn't have time to respond, however, because the other goons had reprised shooting the
Nat and Sharon were hiding behind like there was no tomorrow.

Nat had grown tired. She threw a taser disk over the car that released a powerful electrical discharge as soon as it hit the ground. Several terrorists were electrocuted. "Spidey, little help?" she called as the five remaining ones continued firing.

One second later, all five remaining terrorists were webbed to the wall of the building behind them, unable to move even a pinky finger. Spiderman dropped in a crouch right in front of them: "All packed up. Wow, I have a future in deliveries," he quipped.

Sharon and Natasha shot down four more terrorists that had come out of the building, as one of Quinjets was gently deposited on the ground by Lady Iron, its tail ripped off and its left wing burning. Lady Iron landed and dropped the destroyed jet on the tarmac, rising to her full height only to be hit by a bazooka right between her shoulder blades.

When the smoke cleared, the man who had just shot her watched in horror as she slowly and menacingly turned to look at him over her shoulder, the only damage to her armor being a blackened spot on her back. Friday then fully turned and started to walk up to him. Before she could even make it halfway, the guy had already tossed his weapon and raised his hands, trembling like a leaf.

As Sharon rounded up the remaining, surrendering terrorists, the last Quinjet landed vertically in the middle of the street. Tony landed right in front of it, his arm still raised and threatening the occupants with a tank missile.

"Come on now, out of the plane! Marsh!" Tony ordered.

The rear ramp lowered and the terrorists sulkingly walked out of the jet in an ordinate line, all with their hands behind their heads.

"Alright, so these guys were the last ones?" Rhodey asked.

"I'm not detecting any more hostiles in the area, Colonel," Friday confirmed as Wasp and Yellowjacket walked out of the building looking like they were just walking out of a bar after taking a coffee.

"Five minutes and eleven seconds from initial approach to mission accomplished," Rhodey remarked with an impressed tone: "That's got to be a new record! Great job, team!"

Everybody smiled at him.

***

As the Quinjet took off to return to the Avengers Compound, Peter sat in the back looking at his phone. Suddenly, a text from Karen appeared on the display: 'A perfectly executed mission, Peter. Congratulations,' it read.

He was confused for a moment before texting back: 'Thank you, Karen, but why are you texting me? I still have my earpiece on,' he answered.

'I just wanted to chat with you in private, and the Quinjet is too small and crowded to have a private conversation,' Karen replied.

Peter was a bit confused. Since when Karen wanted to talk to him in private? 'Well... Okay, what did you want to tell me?' he texted.
'It's just that you seemed a bit distracted today,' Karen wrote, 'you were not entirely in the groove...'

'These guys were a bunch of incompetents,' Peter texted dismissively, 'one or two of us would have been enough to take them all. I didn't really need to give it my A-game. '

'Yes, but I don't think that's why you were so distracted, were you Peter? I noticed you checking out Friday more than once during the mission...'

Peter fumbled for a long moment, unsure of what to write back.

It was true. He had drifted a couple times, admiring Friday kicking ass in her amazing suit. And it wasn't the first time...

It hadn't immediately clicked. At first, Friday had been just a very good friend. But with time, Peter had grown to really love her kindness, her intelligence, her character... and then one day, he caught himself thinking of how beautiful she looked.

He had slowly but surely fallen in love with her, but he had a little trouble externalizing it. He was too self-conscious, too shy maybe, to act on his burgeoning feelings.

After a while, Karen wrote again: 'Friday would be a very lucky girl to have you :)'

Peter smiled a little self-deprecating smile: 'I think you got it the wrong way around. I'm the one who would be lucky to have her even just look my way twice...'

'Why do you say that?' Karen asked.

'Because... Come on, she is Friday Stark, and I'm just a nerd from Queens! Why would she even spare me a second thought?'

'Aww, because you're amazing, Peter! Don't look down on yourself like that! :('

'She's way too good for me, Karen.'

'I think you should let Friday be the judge of that, Peter. She might surprise you. Trust me, I know that. She's my sister, after all ;)'

Peter frowned in confusion. What did that mean? What did Karen know? Friday didn't... She didn't really like him back, did she? No, that would be ridiculous...

'What do you mean?' he finally wrote.

'Just that if you stopped thinking Friday is too good for you, you might be in with a chance ;D'

Peter's eyes bulged at his phone before he jerked his head towards Friday. She looked his way and smiled. Oh, God... Is it true? Does she actually like me?!

Apparently, Peter lingered too much, because Friday's expression became curious. Peter flushed redder than his suit and waved at her awkwardly with a dumb smile.

*Real smooth, Parker. Now she thinks you're an idiot*, Peter thought. But Friday only smiled back at him and looked down.

Peter's phone vibrating caught his attention once more. There was another text from Karen: 'A word of advice, Peter: don't wait too long. If you don't make a move she'll turn elsewhere... and she IS Friday Stark, after all. She can have anybody she wants. So man up and go get her, Spiderman!'
The Quinjet was landing. Peter gulped and took a deep breath as the rear ramp was lowered.

Karen was right. He didn't want to let Friday slip through his fingers. He would beat himself over it forever if he did.

"Hey, Friday?" he called as everyone started to disembark, trying to sound as casual as possible.

She turned to him, still smiling: "Yes, Peter?"

And all of a sudden, all of Peter's resolve had crumbled and his tongue was like a useless lump in his throat.

*Come on, man! You can do this!*

"I, uh... I'm... I just wanted to say, uh... Good job back there today," he said in the most awkward way possible, even going as far as to pat Friday's shoulder. *Oh, what the hell am I doing!?*

Friday's brow furrowed slightly, but her smile didn't falter: "Thank you, Peter. You did very good too."

They stared at each other for what immediately became the most awkward minute of Peter's eighteen years long life, before he actually managed to reconnect his brain to his mouth:

"Say, uh... Since we did so good... would you like to, uh... I mean... have dinner with me? You know, so that we can celebrate a mission well done... We can have dinner... I-I mean, I can b-buy you dinner... If you want to," Peter rambled, before realizing he was making a fool of himself and decided to shut up.

Friday looked down with a flattered expression and brushed her hair behind her ear, in a move that made Peter's blood rush towards his nether regions.

No, please, don't do that while I'm wearing skin-tight spandex... God, this is so embarrassing, he thought as he cleared his voice and casually joined his hands to cover his gentleman's area, where he suspected his tent was starting to show.

Mercifully, Friday didn't seem to notice his problems: "I'd love to, Peter. Thank you for inviting me," she smiled.

"Y-you... you... Ok, great! I, um... Do you like Italian?"

"Sure!"

"Ok... Good! I'll uh, book a table at Luigi's... Y-you... know Luigi's?"

Friday giggled: "Yes. It's in Queens, three blocks from your apartment, right?"

"Yeah," Peter said, nodding like an imbecile.

"What time do you want me to be there?" Friday asked.

"Seven! I mean, nine! I mean, eight! 8 pm!"

Friday giggled again: "Alright. See you tonight, Peter," she said, smiling at him again and turning to enter the Compound.

"...see you tonight, Friday..." Peter whispered. When he finally turned to leave, his face hurt from how much he was smiling.
In the same moment, deep in the Dark Net, two very scheming female artificial intelligences were congratulating each other for a job well done.

***

Rhodey was in his office, the office that used to be Tony's. More than two years ago, when he had taken over as leader of the Avengers, Tony had insisted that Rhodey moved into this office, saying it was an office purposely made for the leader of the Avengers. Which was bullshit: Rogers had used a different office, during his reign of terror. However, long before Rhodey had recovered from his injuries enough to get into the War Machine suit again, Rogers' office had been repurposed as a broom closet, so Tony did have a point... sort of.

Rhodey stared at the blonde woman in front of him. It was not every day that he evaluated a possible new member of the Avengers. In two years, only three new members had joined the team: Sharon Carter, who was already sort of an unofficial member, Jim Paxton, when Hope offered him the new Yellowjacket suit, and much more recently, Peter Parker, right after his eighteenth birthday.

Nobody asked Pepper if she wanted in, and she didn't ask to join either: she had a suit and had signed the Accords, but the suit was more for personal protection and to be able to intervene as fast as possible if a member of her family ever got hurt. Besides, being CEO of Stark Industries was a rather time-consuming job.

So the Avengers gaining a new member was not a very common occurrence. And this time, it was also a bit awkward.

Lieutenant Colonel Carol Danvers was sat in front of him, dressed in full military regalia. Her crisp and composed posture didn't entirely conceal her nervousness.

Back when Rhodey had been training recruits, Carol had been his best student.

She was a damn good pilot. So good, in fact, that Rhodey had been drawn to her. How could he not? She was fun, intelligent, and she made Maverick look like an amateur...

They both knew it was a bad idea. A student/teacher romance was always a bad idea, especially in the military. But that wasn't what cut their budding relationship short.

It was the year 2006. Carol had been just promoted to Captain, and she was attached to the flight group of the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, cruising in the Mediterranean Sea. If things went smoothly, in a few months she would have led her own squadron. But things didn't go smoothly at all.

The mission was simple reconnaissance work, taking a few photographs of possible Al Qaeda outposts in the Iraqi desert. Carol had done several missions like that already; she could practically go through it with her eyes closed. This time was no different, but when she returned to the carrier and made to land, she came in too fast and too low.

Her F-35 smashed hard on the flightdeck, its right-hand fuel tank exploding on impact. It slid down nearly half the length of the landing deck in a ball of fire, moving towards the port side of the ship. Almost two hundred yards from the stern, the wrecked fighter rolled over the side of the flightdeck and fell in the water.

Carol had nearly drowned, managing to get out of the destroyed aircraft just in the nick of time before it sank. Her injuries were not serious, but she had caused a disaster.

A member of the carrier's flight personnel had also been thrown overboard in the crash. He survived,
but he was in a coma for five weeks, with several broken bones and a few second and third degree burns on his left arm from the explosion of the jet.

An inquiry was opened immediately. The Air Force was pissed about their destroyed jet, and the Navy was possibly even more pissed: the carrier itself had sustained negligible damage, basically just a big scorch mark on its flightdeck, but that sailor could very well have died.

Once the aircraft's black box was recovered, the investigation panel quickly came to the conclusion that it had been a human mistake. It had been Carol's fault.

They took her wings off and downgraded her to First Lieutenant. For Carol, it was devastating.

She could have gotten back on a plane in three months time if she had put her back into it, but she had fallen into depression. She started drinking, and failed the reinstatement test twice. Rhodey was trying to support her, but she kept pushing him away. Pushing everyone away.

After eight months of yelling and fighting, Rhodey ended it.

Weirdly enough - or maybe not so much - that turned out to be exactly the push Carol needed: she went to see a psychiatrist, took care of her alcoholism, and threw herself back into work more determined than ever before.

She got her plane back and climbed through the ranks like a cat climbs on a tree, getting her career and her old life back.

The one thing she didn't get back was Rhodey.

Things remained sour for a long time between them. They only started talking to each other again when Tony told the world: "The truth is... I am Iron Man."

Carol had only met Tony three or four times before. She had expected him to hit on her, but maybe he already knew of her and Rhodey's relationship, because he never did. Still, after his memorable press conference, Carol had called Rhodey and labeled him a hypocrite for letting a man with a drinking problem bigger than hers - and a civilian at that - fly into a warzone in a weaponized suit of armor while she had to go through strict evaluation to get her wings back. He retorted by saying that first, no one's drinking problem could possibly be bigger than Carol's, and second, he wasn't allowing anything: Tony had already been subpoenaed to a Senate hearing about the Iron Man suit.

The air between the two former lovers started to clear only after the Expo, when Tony and Rhodey had both been awarded medals for how they handled Vanko and Hammer. Carol came to understand that Tony did have a point about holding onto his tech, and what Iron Man had achieved in terms of world peace in just six months was undeniable. Rhodey and Carol still ended up having heated arguments from time to time, but they were making progress. However, neither of them tried to rekindle their romantic relationship. It just... didn't feel right anymore.

Then, in 2011, the NASA called Carol and made her an offer she could not refuse.

Project Constellation was something never attempted before: an exploration of deep space, using cutting edge technology to reach Saturn's orbit and collect a whole new lot of data about the Solar System and the universe in its entirety. Carol had always liked a challenge, and as far as challenges went, an Air Force pilot couldn't ask for much better. Also, Rhodey was making a name for himself as War Machine, and if she was honest with herself Carol was feeling a bit jealous, like he was leaving her in the dust. She accepted immediately.

But Project Constellation went wrong almost immediately after launch.
Carol's spaceship had gone off course right after exiting Earth's atmosphere. After fifteen minutes of frantic radio transmission, the NASA headquarters in Houston had lost all contacts.

Carol was lost in space.

Everybody thought she was dead for almost six years.

Instead, to everyone's surprise, four months ago Carol had finally made it back to Earth. She had somehow gained superpowers - and they were really super powers: levitation, super strength, speed and endurance superior to even those of an asgardian, and energy projection. She could be just as strong as Vision... maybe even more.

She was brought up to speed on everything that had happened in the intervening time. When she learned about the whole Civil War fiasco, she decided to sign the Accords in a heartbeat. And then she left Earth again.

Apparently she had made friends in space. Which should sound absurd, but in the last few years Rhodey's definition of absurd had changed pretty drastically. Carol had returned only a couple of weeks ago.

And now, there she was, in Rhodey's office, asking if she could join the Avengers.

The Accords Committee had already approved her, but it was Rhodey who had the last word about her joining the team or not, and he had a few reservations. He wanted to make sure their previous history wouldn't get in the way of them working together in the field... and especially of his relationship with Hope.

Apparently, Carol had guessed his thoughts, because she leaned forward and spoke softly: "You don't seem very convinced..." she prodded.

Rhodey shook his head: "Carol, don't take it personally, but... I don't know if we can be strictly professional with each other."

"Rhodey... Colonel," she said resolutely, "I assure you, I don't mean to cause any problems to you. I know you've met another person," she assured him.

"It's not just that, it's..." Rhodey sighed wearily, leaning back in his chair, "Carol, at the risk of sounding like an asshole... why are you only coming back now? I thought you were dead for six years. I mourned, I cried... and then one day, all of a sudden, you come back with superpowers and ask me to join the Avengers. You'll understand if I'm a bit overwhelmed," he said, slightly disappointed.

Carol flinched ever so slightly: "You're right. I should have come back sooner. There's no excuse for that, and I'm sorry. But... We were over, Rhodey. I had no family and not many friends, I didn't think I would be missed much. Besides, I didn't get my powers and learn to control them in five minutes, and even after that... I couldn't just say 'Thank you, it's been fun' and come back home. It was complicated. Things had changed... I had changed. It's a long story."

"Fair enough... Can I have a trimmed down version though? Just the essential parts," Rhodey wanted to know, smiling encouragingly.

Carol's lips twitched upward: "Asgardians and Chitauri are not the only people out there, Rhodey. There are countless species on countless planets. The Kree Empire is one of the most powerful intergalactic communities in all the cosmos. They are the ones that saved me in space. Even my powers come from them."
"So you're in cahoots with an intergalactic empire. You've become quite a big shot, haven't you?" Rhodey teased.

Carol smiled: "Yeah. You didn't slouch either, though. Leader of Earth's mightiest heroes? That looks like a hell of a promotion..."

"Sort of," Rhodey smiled back, "and I hear you would like to join them," he prodded.

Carol's expression turned grim: "Yes, because we might have a problem," she said.

"We, as in the Earth?" Rhodey wanted to know.

"We, as in the entire universe," Carol replied.

"Oh, that's not at all ominous..." Rhodey muttered.

"I know, right? And I still haven't even told you that Asgard has been destroyed..." Carol continued.

It sounded like a joke, but her face was carved in stone. Rhodey's eyes bulged slightly. *Asgard!? Destroyed!? I thought Asgardians were as strong as they came! How was Asgard destroyed!?*

Carol seemed to have understood his question, because she started to explain: "It was a fire demon, his name is Surtur," she said, "The king of a planet called Muspelheim, a place covered in fire. He's a giant made of fire and molten lava, a thousand feet tall. A few millennia ago, he used to wreak havoc all across the galaxy, until Odin defeated him..."

"Odin? Thor's father?" Rhodey interrupted.

"Yes," Carol confirmed, "we don't know how, but a few months ago Surtur reappeared out of the blue and destroyed Asgard. Then he went on a rampage, destroying planet after planet, including two Kree outposts."

Rhodey was still trying to wrap his head around it all: "So you think he's heading for Earth next?" he asked gravely.

"Unfortunately, I think so... I don't know why, but he's following a course that should lead him here in about four months..." Carol said.

Rhodey leaned back in his chair: "A demon made of fire... who destroyed Asgard. Holy shit."


"You think we can fight him?" Rhodey asked then.

"I don't know," Carol answered with a weary sigh, "but one thing is for sure: you're gonna need all the help you can get. And despite everything that's happened in the last six years, Earth is still my home, and I'm gonna fight for it till my last breath. If it's gonna be alongside the Avengers or on my own, it's your decision to make, Rhodey."

Rhodey nodded solemnly. If this guy had destroyed Asgard... they were gonna need all the help they could get. And judging by Carol's file, she was a heavy hitter - as heavy as they come. He couldn't afford to turn down an asset like her, not because of a relationship that had been over for years.

Really, the decision was already made.

"Report here to the Compound tomorrow at 0800 sharp, Lieutenant Colonel Danvers," he told her,
"we'll get you settled and introduce you to the rest of your new team."

***

Peter was as tense as a violin string as he waited in front of Luigi's Restaurant. He didn't think he could get any more agitated until a white Porsche 911 Carrera S pulled over into the parking slot closest to the door.

Peter saw Friday get out of the car, and it was as if the whole world had stopped: she was gorgeous.

She was wearing a black and red qipao, so elegant and gracious that Peter immediately felt underdressed. Her fiery red hair was tied in a French braid falling on her left shoulder, looking like lava trickling down the side of a volcano. Even in a long dress like that one, she exuded power, just like she did in her suit of armor.

Peter was sweating as she approached him with a dazzling smile. Thank God at least this time I'm wearing baggy pants...

"Hey, Friday... You look stunning," Peter said, proud of himself for having managed not to stutter or make a fool of himself (yet).

"Thanks, Peter. You clean up very nice yourself," Friday smiled, reaching out and fixing the knot of his tie.

Peter gulped audibly. "Right... well... Shall we?" he asked, jerkily offering her his arm. She giggled and took his elbow as they headed inside the restaurant.

"So... Today's bad guys were not really supervillains, were they?" Peter asked, starting the conversation on a neutral topic, trying to keep his raging nervousness in check and also trying not to pay attention to all the paparazzi that were crowding the place around them. Tomorrow at school was certainly going to be fun.

"No, definitely not. They probably thought, having Quinjets, that they could get in, hack what they needed and get out before we could get there. They were obviously wrong," Friday retorted, "But they were good for you," she added as an afterthought.

Peter perked up: "What do you mean?"

"Well, they give you the chance to start small and slowly ease yourself into the Avengers business without throwing you into a battle for the fate of the world right from the start. I started small myself, Thaddeus Ross was not exactly a threat comparable to Loki or Ultron..." Friday explained.

"Huh. I never thought about it that way," Peter considered, before smiling and raising his glass of water: "To small and stupid villains then," he said. Friday smiled and clinked her glass against his.

As they drank, both their phones vibrated, and Friday's expression turned sour as she looked at hers.

"Sis, I really hate to interrupt, but we have a situation in Central Park," Jocasta's Scottish-accented voice resonated from Friday's phone, "I'm sending Stinger to you."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake!" Friday protested out loud, "I took the evening off! I even turned off all my communication systems because I don't want to be disturbed!"

"Fri, you know Spiday is my OTP," Jocasta replied, "do you really think I would ruin your first ever date if it wasn't important? You two are the closest to the site..."
Friday sighed in defeat: "Alright, hit me. What's going on?"

"An electromagnetic storm rising out of nowhere, compatible with an Einstein-Rosen bridge," Jocasta told her, "the energy signature is similar but not identical to that of the Asgardian Bifrost..."

This sounded serious. Carol Danvers had come to the Avengers that morning, bearing bad news. She told them that Asgard had been destroyed and there was some sort of fire demon heading for Earth. Was he already here?

"Friday... Did you get that?" Peter asked, showing her his phone.

"Yeah, we have to go," she said, before looking down at her dress: "I can't put on the suit over this... damn. Suiting up in nothing but my underwear. That's gonna be a new experience," she muttered.

Peter went red like a tomato.

"Go ahead," Friday told him without paying any attention to his reaction, "I'll meet you there, I'm gonna go get changed. Jo, send my armour to the roof."

***

Spiderman was already webbing ahead and half the way to Central Park when Lady Iron zoomed past him at low altitude. He reached their destination almost ten minutes after her.

As he jumped down from a tree next to Friday, the clouds in the sky were starting to swirl in a circular pattern right above their heads.

"Here we go..." Friday announced, mentally preparing for a fight. A few seconds later, a giant streak of light very similar to that caused by the Bifrost shot down from the sky and hit the ground. Peter had to cover his eyes with an arm until it diffused.

As the dust settled, a black haired woman clad in a medieval looking armor appeared before them. She wielded a double-bladed sword, holding it like a cane and leaning heavily into it to keep herself upright. She looked pretty roughed up.

"Do you think she's Asgardian?" Peter asked Friday, "She looks pretty Asgardian to me..."

The woman seemed to notice them, but didn't move. She seemed to be badly wounded.

"Hi," Peter said lamely, before clearing his voice, "Identify yourself," he then commanded, dropping his voice about an octave.

"I am Lady Sif, of Asgard," the mysterious woman replied in a pained voice.

"Greetings," Friday replied, "I'm Lady Iron, of Manhattan. State your intentions."

"I come with a warning," Sif gritted out and tried to take a step forward, but dropped down on one knee, holding her midsection in pain. Both Friday and Peter rushed to help her lay down.

"I was on Vanaheim, when the fire demon Surtur attacked... We fought bravely, but we never stood a chance... and then..." Sif started to recount in a barely audible voice.

"Surtur?" Friday asked. As Spiderman turned to her with a questioning gaze, she explained: "Colonel Rhodes had a meeting today. After that, he called the Accords Committee to discuss a possible extraterrestrial threat. I heard the name Surtur..." she told him.
"No," Sif said, grabbing her arm. She looked like she had just come face to face with Death: "Surtur has been slain..." she rasped. Friday and Peter looked at her with matching shocked expressions.

Sif was struggling to speak: "I fought Surtur alongside the Vanir, but we were like mosquitoes to him... The battle was all but lost, but before he could destroy Vanaheim once and for all, a much more powerful being manifested himself... He wielded an Infinity Stone, and he was looking for revenge on Surtur for... for hurting the woman he loves... Surtur's power paled in comparison to his... he f-fell... like he... was n-nothing..."

The two Avemgers exchanged worried looks. Friday then turned back to Sif: "Who? Who was it?" she asked. But Sif closed her eyes and lost consciousness.

Peter looked at Friday, unsure of what to do. Friday was still looking at Sif's unconscious form. Then she looked up to Peter:

"You know what we said about small and stupid villains?" she asked him. He just nodded in acknowledgement.

Friday looked back down at Sif: "This isn't one of them."

THE END

Wanda was returning to her room. She was exhausted.

Strange's training was very taxing, and it didn't look like it was getting her anywhere. What was the point when the whole world had forgotten her and wanted nothing to do with her anymore?

However, right now she was too exhausted to start mulling over it. All she wanted was to go to bed. But apparently, she was not going to be able to.

A bright streak of light burst in front of her all of a sudden. Startled, Wanda fell backwards. Then the light faded, and a giant green man was left in its wake.

Wanda nearly had a heart attack: the Hulk was there!

How did he get here!? How did he find me!? What does he want to do to me!? were her thoughts. Was he looking for vengeance too, after what she had done to him all those years ago!?

The Hulk was on all fours and moving slowly and wearily towards her. "No, please! I'm sorry! Oh God, please, leave me alone!" Wanda begged, crawling backwards.

It took her a few seconds to notice that the Hulk was slowly shrinking back into Bruce Banner.

Strange and Wong arrived running when the trasformation was already nearly complete. In a couple more seconds, the beast was gone, and in its place was Doctor Banner. His eyes were wild with fear.

"He's coming..." he said, pulling himself up on his knees, "Thanos is coming..."
This is what the Iron Man armor Mark 49 'Ninja' looks like:
https://www.dhresource.com/600x600/f2/albu/g4/M01/7A/9D/rBVaEFn0KPGAOFWrAAGk4aSqkY4973.jpg

It's still not the Nanotech suit Tony has in the Infinity War movie, but it's made of Vibranium and supercharged with Extremis... >:-).

Also, I'm ignoring the fact that in the MCU apparently Carol Danvers got her powers in the 1990s. This 'verse will not be Captain Marvel-compliant.

As for Surtur, his little cameo happened because the ending of Thor Ragnarok makes little to no sense to me: Ok, so Surtur has defeated Hela (although 'defeated' might be a strong word... more like he 'stopped' Hela). But now who's gonna defeat Surtur? Are we supposed to believe that he conveniently offed himself when he destroyed Asgard? Yeah, not buying that. So in this story, after destroying Asgard he went on a rampage and blew a few more planets... until Thanos got in his way. And yes, in the meantime Thor was blissfully ignorant about all of it, slowly heading for Earth in his spaceship with his fellow Asgardian refugees. But more of that in the sequel of this story.

I hope you liked this chapter and this story, and that you'll stick with me for what comes next! Thank you for all the kudos, the comments and the lovely support! you people are awesome!

And so we begin. I hope you enjoyed! I'll try to update this story once a week, two weeks tops. Until next time!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!