If You Want to Hear God Laugh...

by Duchess

Summary

The Accords are finalized - at least as well as can be expected - so Steve and the rest are finally able to return home and stop hiding. But they will soon learn that returning is much harder than leaving for while you may always be able to come home you also have to face the people you hurt. Steve Rogers is about to learn that not everything can be fixed with a lousy apology no matter how sincere. As everyone comes back together to face the consequences of their actions 10 months ago they also have to find a way to be the Avengers again because the worlds’ in danger and their enemy doesn’t care if they’re ready to fight or not.
Chapter I

IF YOU WANT TO HEAR GOD LAUGH…

“If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans.” ~Woody Allen

This was not how he imagined his homecoming would be. Sure, Steve didn’t think everything would just magically be okay between him and the Tower’s owner – currently standing in front of him, but still not looking at him – but he’d thought it would have been better than this –this coldness. Steve knew he’d fucked up in Siberia and with that phone and letter; he’d known almost as soon as he’d sent it, but at the time he couldn’t think of a better way to let Tony know that he was still there for him… especially after everything that they’d said to one another.

When King T’challa had come to them barely five days ago to tell them they could go home the first thing he’d felt was excitement. Wakanda was a beautiful country and its people beyond hospitable, but it was not home and he knew that despite how welcoming the people were to them they were also relieved to see Steve and the rest go. Every day that they were there was a risk for T’challa and his people and while he appreciated all that they had done for them – for Bucky – he knew that all of them were putting the country at risk by being there and that knowledge did not sit well with him and the rest of the group.

They had all quickly agreed that they were beyond ready to go home – though he knew they all had wondered just where that was.

Home.

Home was proving to be a concept a bit harder to grasp then one might first have thought. Steve was learning that it was more than just a location, more than just a feeling… it was also a person or people, it was love and it was belonging. It was something that he thought he’d lost to water and ice and time. It was something he dreamed of, but never really believed he’d ever find again. So he’d never bothered to actually look.

He’d learned to accept this new world he’d waken up to, fought and bled for, but he never really let it in. Never truly gave it or the people a chance. He couldn’t. He couldn’t give this future that was now his present a chance, because he’d have to let go of the past to do it. And Steve hadn’t been ready to let go. He didn’t want to. He was pining and hurting and all he wanted was to be back with the friends and loved ones he’d lost.

But that wasn’t an option, so he’d tried. As much as Steve could anyway. He’d traveled and explored this world, gone farther in this country he’d always considered home than he’d ever thought he’d get to do and seen more than he’d ever imagined seeing. He’d met new people and made new friends and comrades to fight alongside and somehow made a life for himself in this new world that was full of echoes of the past.

And somehow, without his notice or trying he’d made himself a family, a home… and he didn’t realize it, didn’t realize what he’d built ‘til he’d destroyed it and left it crumbling in his wake.

But T’challa had provided him with a chance, a chance to fix-it and maybe make it better than before, but he hadn’t thought it would be this hard. He didn’t know just how broken things were,
just how broken they all were and that the time away had not made anything better. It just built a scab over a festering wound. T’challa had warned him – warned them all – that returning would not be easy, but at the time he didn’t think any of them had truly understood just exactly what the king meant.

...King T’challa walked into the communal room that he’d provided for his guests to use. He’d sent Ayo earlier to let them all know he wanted to meet with them all before lunch and he was happy to see all five members waiting for him.

“Ah. Good day everyone,” he smiled in greeting as he entered the sitting room where they all were waiting. “Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice.”

“Not a problem, T’challa, you know that,” replied Steve. “Is there something wrong?”

“On the contrary, Captain, I have great news.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it would seem that you all have been granted a pardon by your government,” he smiled then added, “as of this morning you are all free to return home without prejudice.”

They all stared at him in various stages of shock and disbelief. T’challa waited a moment as he looked from one to the other then frowned. “I thought this would be good news...”

“No, no, it is,” said Sam, finally speaking up as he exchanged looks with the others. “It’s great news. I just... I mean, how? How is this possible?”

“You’ve had many people fighting in your corner with the UN to not only get you all home and off the terrorist list, but also to revise the Accords and get rid of General Ross,” he replied as he sat a thick packet of papers on the table in front of them. “It is not over by any means, but it is well on its way. You should be very thankful that the other Avengers worked so hard for you.”

“What is that?” asked Clint

“Tony did this?” asked Steve at the exact same time, bringing everyone’s eyes to him, but he only had eyes for T’challa.

“Yes,” nodded the king with a small smile. “Your Tony Stark is a very brilliant man. Much of what has happened has been due to his hard work, though he did not do it alone. The others, as well as myself, were of aide as well. You all have many people who care a great deal about you.”

Both Clint and Wanda rolled their eyes, instantly catching the king’s attention.

“Oh,” he turned to them, the smile dropping from his face. “Do you two disagree with something I have said?”

Wanda froze, hearing the warning tone in their host’s voice. Clint, on the other hand, either did not hear it or did not have the same sense of self-preservation that even the average human had for he didn’t stop in voicing his thoughts.

“Yeah,” replied Clint with a scoff. “I find it hard to believe that Stark gives a shit about anyone other than himself and if he did have a hand in this it’s only right he should as it was his fau-”

“Shut up, Clint,” interrupted Steve, eyes narrowed and arms folded across his chest. Everyone turned to look at the blonde in surprise – and it was probably that same surprise that stopped Clint
“Cap, come on!” he exclaimed, standing from the couch. “You saw what he did to Wanda and you can’t possibly believe he gives a shit about any of us!”

“What I saw is that Tony was right,” replied Steve, also standing and facing the other man. He flicked an apologetic look to Wanda, who was still sitting on the couch beside Clint, but didn’t recant his statement. “Wanda was not ready for the field and innocent lives were lost because of my mistake in allowing her to go. Many people were calling for her head after what happened in Lagos, calling her a witch and wanting her to pay personally for those lives. Tony had the right idea to keep her inside, because I doubt any of this has helped in how the people see her at all. And that’s on me. So don’t you sit there and say he doesn’t care, because if there is one thing that Tony Stark does is care.” Steve looked away from him then before adding under his breath. “Possibly too damn much.”

Clint just stared at him, trying to understand what was going on. If that was how Steve felt than what the hell was all this for?

T’challa looked between both men with a contemplative look, but chose not to comment on what was said. He was in complete agreement with the Captain for he’d not only seen, but heard just how much people feared Ms. Maximoff and what she was capable of, but he thought that was one of the least of the group’s problems.

“To answer your earlier question, Mr. Barton,” began T’challa, trying to defuse some of the tension in the air, “this packet is a copy of the current Accords. I thought maybe you’d all like to see just what your friends have been doing in your absence. Of course, as none of you have signed this, you will not be permitted to act as Avengers without great consequence until you do and even then it will be after a mandatory probationary period.”

“Probationary period?” asked Sam as he bent to grab the packet of papers.

“Yes, should you sign,” nodded T’challa with a shrug. “It was a – how do you American’s say? – act of good faith? Yes. You should read and speak to Tony; he can explain it all in more detail.”

“But we can go home now?” asked Scott, who’d remained quiet until now. He just wanted to go home and see his daughter. After being basically exiled for the last ten months he wasn’t sure, if he’d had to do it all over again, if he would have made the same choices knowing what he now knew – and he wasn’t under any delusion that he had all the facts. But just the fact that Captain America was currently standing in front of them all, obviously regretting all his life choices, was enough to make him reconsider.

And honestly he’d only gone against Stark (besides his inner fanboy drooling over Captain America) because Pym told him no Stark should be trusted. He should have known to take that with a grain of salt. After all, Captain America was on the same team as Tony Stark before all this happened.

“Yes, Mr. Lang,” smiled T’challa at the other man, the only one who seemed to be responding the way he expected, “you can all return to the US. You are no longer to be apprehended and turned in. You can leave as soon as you like. I will have my plane fly you all back.”

“Thank you, T’challa,” said Steve with a grin, true sincerity in his voice. “Not just for this news but for everything. You took us all in and protected us even knowing that had you been discovered doing so could have been very bad for you and your people. I don’t know how we can ever repay you.”
“I do not require repayment, Steve,” he shook his head and lifted his hand to stop Steve in his thoughts. “I did what I felt was right and to help friends of a friend. He would have wanted someone to help you all. But if you insist on repayment, then all I ask is that you tread carefully in your return. Your actions did not go without consequences… consequences that I doubt any of you have begun to truly comprehend. Regaining trust is not an easy feat,” he paused. T’challa looked each of them in the eye so they all knew he was talking to all of them before he returned his gaze to a set of clear blue eyes that had not left his and then added, “Especially where there was also love.” …

Steve shook his head, he’d been so stupid. T’challa had tried warning him, but he’d been too excited about coming home to really see it. He’d just assumed… since he was coming back… coming home… and everything would be waiting for him as it was.

And everything was waiting for him… but not as it was. But exactly as he left it. Broken.

Not just him though; all of them. They’d broken everything, destroyed their family and just walked away…

And he was beginning to realize he had no idea how to fix it, because he’d had no idea just how bad it was. Just watching the others… Laura wouldn’t even look at Clint and their eldest was refusing to have anything to do with the archer. Natasha looked ready to murder all of them in their sleep, except for Scott. Wanda didn’t speak to anyone but Vision and those conversations never seemed to end well from what he could tell without actually eavesdropping on the two. Scott spent most of his time skyping with his daughter or Hope Pym and Tony… Tony seemed to be avoiding them all by hiding in his workroom or his office at SI. It was only about fifteen or twenty floors below his lab, but it may as well be all the way across town, because no one was giving him access to Tony when he was there.

Steve should have known. The genius hadn’t used the phone he’d sent him even once the entire ten months they were gone. He should not be surprised that he was being shut out. But he wanted to apologize, he wanted to try. He needed these people, this man in front of him and he wanted to make it all right again, but he didn’t know how.

How do you convey to a person that you really do care about them after almost abandoning them?

Steve was still having a hard time wrapping his brain around that, that he’d actually used his strength against Tony like that. That with just the minor adjustment of his aim he could have crushed the throat of the man in front of him and crushed the life out of him with it. It hurt to think about, but his nightmares weren’t planning to let him forget anytime soon it looked like as he’d been having them for the past ten months – since Siberia happened.

But maybe even worse than the nightmares was the accusation Tony was throwing at him. Did he really believe that about Steve? Did Tony really believe he’d chosen Bucky over him? Couldn’t Tony see how Steve felt about him? Even if he’d never said it and still haven’t quite allowed himself to fully understand his feelings, he’d thought the phone and letter were at least a start. What did he say to that? This was the first time he’d been able to successfully corner Tony – and he was well aware it was only because Tony let him – and he didn’t want to waste this chance, so he needed to say something fast, because Tony looked like he was about done and Steve had only been in front of him for less than five minutes.

“Come on, Tony. I didn’t choose him over you.” Okay, not his best idea.

“Yes, you did,” Tony nodded as he fiddled absently with the modulator in his hands; something to focus his nervous energy on so he could say what he needed to say. “You can delude yourself all
you want, Rogers, but that’s what you did. Somewhere along the line it stop being about the Accords and became more about Barnes. And I get that. I do. He’s your oldest and best friend and he was being framed and you needed to save him and damned the world and the team to do it. See? I get it. If it was Rhody I imagine I would have done the same,” he shrugged.

And he was back to being called Rogers. Did he mention that? “Okay, then,” nodded Steve, though not sure if he agreed with what the genius was saying, but not really in a place to dispute it, because that was it; he wasn’t sure anymore. About anything. “If you get it than what are we talking about here?”

Tony looked at him then. Did Steve really not understand or was he just being deliberately obtuse?

“I said I get it, that I would have possibly done the same, but that’s not some Tony Stark stamp of approval or something. I’m known for making bad decisions for honorable reasons. Ultron, remember? That was my fault, no matter how you mince it. And while I know I made some bad decisions when it came to the Accords, I was doing it for us, the team. I knew we had to play the game because while the Accords weren’t right they also weren’t wrong. When you have 117 countries speaking out it’s not only our responsibility, but it’s our duty to hear and listen to what they are saying. We may be superhuman to them, but we are not Gods. We make mistakes and we have no right to tell others how they should live or how to defend their country, because our mistakes have a hefty cost. When we’re too slow, too fast, make one choice over another or whatever and lives are lost it’s not us who pays the higher cost. It’s them,” he jabs a finger towards the outer walls, indicating the people outside. “So even when we may not like what they are saying, we damn sure owe them the right to say it and the respect of listening. Isn’t that one of the things your uniform stood for? Instead you turned around and shit all over it and did it for the entire world to see.”

Steve looked away from him then, focusing his gaze somewhere in the vicinity of his feet. He swallowed heavily as he fought back the tears burning his eyes and throat. Tony was right. He did disregard what all those people were asking of them because he thought he knew best. Because he was the one going out there risking his life to fight aliens and killer robots and the like, so he just assumed that he knew what was best, that his judgement was better than their own or some council. At the time he didn’t think about the families and the loved ones of the people he was unable to save. That was war. And he knew war. Innocent people die and he’d long ago learned to accept that, but he’d forgotten that not everyone lived a life of war. Not everyone was a soldier. Somewhere in his anger over the Accords he’d forgotten that.

Tony sighed as he ran a hand over his face, fighting not to let Rogers’ kicked puppy stance sway his words and stop him. This needed to be said because they both had some hard truths to face.

“That’s what we’re talking about here. I understood your stance on the Accords, but you didn’t even try. You just left. Barnes became your only priority and you weren’t even willing to try to work with me or Natasha to find a better way. It was all about Barnes. We could have helped you with him, helped you protect him while we worked on fixing the Accords, but you decided we weren’t worth trusting at all because we saw more than just your friend in all of this. We no longer mattered,” the ‘I didn’t matter’ was left unsaid, but echoing loudly through the work-lab. “And I would really really like to understand why. All your talk of trust and team and you were the one who’d been lying to me all along. Did it ever occur to you that maybe – just maybe had you told me about Barnes and my parents I’d have had the time to be hurt and angry and then to put it all into perspective? I’m not an idiot Steve, I could see that your friend was brainwashed and didn’t deserve to be held accountable for what Hydra did. You think that was the first time Howard had been targeted? Of course not. But you didn’t give me that chance. Once more you decided you knew what was best for someone else.”
He shook his head as he gave a self-deprecating laugh. “We all, each of us – except maybe Brucie bear, because he’s Bruce and he’d lived through that kind of shit his entire childhood and more, so yeah, and maybe Honey bear, because he just rocks and would never – anyway, like I was saying, all of us has this bit of superiority complex that makes us believe it’s okay to make decisions for other people. I did it when I built Ultron and we all know what a phenomenal fuck up that was, but it happened. It happened because I thought I could make something that could save the world and keep us all out of danger. I was scared and I needed to protect. And while I may never forgive Maximoff for giving me that vision, I can’t blame her for my actions. We’ve all done it. The pirate’s notorious for it. Now you have, too. The difference with you is that you’ve done it so often and have usually been right that you don’t even realize you’re doing it. What I learned recently is that that behavior usually stems from some kind of fear. So what were you afraid of, Rogers?”

Steve stared at him, eyes narrowed. What was he afraid of? Many things scared him. Mostly, right now, he was afraid he was never going to get his family back. But he was sure that wasn’t what Tony wanted to hear right now nor was it what the engineer was asking him.

God, Tony really felt like crying right now. Or drinking. Yeah, drinking sounded so much better. But there was no way Natasha, Pepper or Laura was going to let that happen and with FRIDAY on their side he didn’t even have a swig of alcohol in the whole goddamn tower any way. How much more of this did he have to endure?

“You don’t have to answer that,” he said after a moment with a shake of his head. “Probably doesn’t matter now anyway,” he shrugged. “You know what the funniest thing about all of this is? When I attacked Barnes – you know, right before you two nearly killed me and actually did leave me for dead in Siberia in a dead armor for anyone to come across me? Or no one? Who knows, right. Well, it was really you I was most angry at. I only attacked him, because for some stupid, misguided reason I blamed him for you lying to me and keeping it a secret. For you choosing him. But I had a nice, long time to lay there and think about it all. After all, I had nothing else better to do while I lay waiting to die. In the end I came to the conclusion that Barnes isn’t to blame for any of it; not for all the assassinations, for my mother… nor for your choices.”

Steve’s head snapped up then. He could see the bright, wateriness in Tony’s whiskey-brown eyes and he had to ball his hands at his side to keep from reaching out. No matter how much he wanted it, he knew his touch would not be welcome right now, if ever again. He’d really fucked everything up.

“Don’t get me wrong, it took some time and effort – I’m not nearly so magnanimous and I had plenty of help,” he shrugged, “but I finally got there. So I decided I wasn’t going to let that bastard, Zemo, win; I was going to do things my way. The Tony-Stark-way. And the first thing to do was to get Barnes acquitted, because that I could do. I may not have been able to make Captain America see reason, but I could do that and I could fix the Accords and I could make sure all those other countries not only felt like they were being heard, but also listened to. And I did. We did. In the end the Accords were fixed to something we can all live with and you and your ragtag bunch got to come home; Barton and Lang are able to return to their families, respectively, and SHIELD is truly running the way it should have been. Everyone’s happy. At least until the next crisis and we really get to find out just who is trusted and who isn’t, but that’s neither here nor there. We’ll face that when and if it comes – or at least some of us will. Right now, there are far better people taking up the slack that the Avengers left.”

He stared at the blond for a moment longer, both happy and angry to see him. He might need to get away from the Tower for a while if Steve was truly planning to move back onto his floor for good. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to see the other man every day nor how long he could keep finding
other places to be. Honestly, he wasn’t sure if he’d ever be ready for that.

“Well,” he began as he tossed the modulator on his desk to get lost among the clutter, he needed to escape now. “I think I’m going to head to bed.”

“Tony… don’t you think we need to talk more about this?”

“Maybe,” he agreed with a nod. “But I’m tired and I don’t want to talk anymore. I’ve been up for… 42-”

“53 hours, boss,” came a feminine voice through the lab.

“53 hours and I don’t want to end up saying something I may later regret – if I haven’t already,” he tried to smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “We’ll pick it back up later, yeah? It’s waited this long, what’s another day or two… or three.” He turned for the door, calling over his shoulder, “have a good night, Cap. Welcome back.”

Steve sighed as he watched Tony enter the elevator and leave without once looking back. Considering the lack of a wait, he figured FRIDAY had been holding the elevator for her creator. And with that he could probably safely assume the AI was angry with him considering her lack of greeting to him – though she had no problem speaking to Wanda, Sam and Scott (though also not Clint as far as he knew) – or anything else despite the fact he’d been back at the Tower for nearly a week now.

And now that he thought about it, Natasha hadn’t spoken to him since his return either. He wondered if she had at least talked to Clint, though he wouldn’t bet on it. She’d given them both pretty severe glares when they’d arrived before silently leaving the room.

“Yeah…” he sighed quietly, “‘Welcome back’ me….”

“Yeah, welcome back Steve.”

He barely hid his flinch as he looked up to see Natasha standing in front of him, arms folded across her chest. He’d never even heard the redhead assassin come in.

“I’d call you ‘Captain’, but does the name even apply anymore?” she asked, eyes like steel as she watched him. “I mean do you even know where the shield is?”

Steve had no answer for her, because he didn’t know the answer to those questions. He’d left the shield to Tony, but he had no idea what the genius did with it and as for the Captain America name…. well, it never really belonged to him anyway. It was just a part he played. He imagined it belonged to the US Army or SHIELD. But he wasn’t about to say all of that to Natasha and he figured she knew already any way. She probably even knew the answers to those questions. So instead he just stared quietly back at her as he waited for her to say her peace. He figured he owed her that much and, honestly, Steve was just glad she was finally speaking to him. He’d take her anger over her silent treatment any day, because a silent Natasha wasn’t just angry at you… she was also disappointed in you. And Natasha’s disappointment made him feel a lot like Sarah Rogers and Peggy’s disappointment once made him feel and he couldn’t take that on top of everything else.

Not with Tony’s pain making him feel that way already; like there was a cinder block in his stomach that just wouldn’t go away.

“Don’t worry, Steve,” said Natasha as she noted the sad look in his eyes. “I’m not going to yell at you. Besides, Tony said most of it already. I’m angry at you for not listening to me and for
bringing Clint into this, but I can’t blame you for his decisions.” She tilted her head as she gave him a considering look. “I just wonder if it was worth it. Was it? Everything you did… the choices you made; was it worth all this? Now? Because from where I’m standing I’d have to say no, but maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you think we’re all expendable for the right reasons… I don’t know. All I know is that we were able to make it right without you when we shouldn’t have had to,” she stared at him. “He shouldn’t have had to.”

“I know,” he nodded.

“Do you?” she asked. “Because I don’t think you do. I don’t think you realize just how much Tony went through for all of you. For Barnes. Do you think it’s easy to stand in front of the entire world and watch your mother be strangled by the Winter Soldier and then stand up and tell the world he shouldn’t be held accountable for it? Because if you think it is, you’re sadly mistaken. And then to watch that footage over and over as every news station known to man played it for every news hour it could before he could get a gag put on it. Trust me, nothing about this has been easy. Not for Tony, not for any of us. But while you were running around only thinking about your friend, we were here trying to make sure none of you remained labeled as criminals and at the same time keep ourselves out of jail. Which wasn’t easy since a good portion of the population was on your side because you’re Captain America and there’s no way you could be wrong and Tony Stark -billionaire, genius, philanthropist, playboy – could may be right. What would the world be coming to??”

She paused and blinked as she looked away from him. He couldn’t see into her eyes, but he thought he could see a bit of shine from the corner, but wasn’t certain. He hoped it was just a trick of the light, because if things had been bad enough to put tears in even Natasha’s eyes… then things had gotten much worse than he thought around here. And if that was the case, he really didn’t want to run into Ms. Potts, Rhodey… or Bruce.

“No, you don’t know,” she shook her head as she turned back to him. “You can never know what it feels like to have the majority of the country hate you and calling for you to be thrown in jail just because you fought against a national icon. While at the same time, you fight in private to get that same icon home and free, because a good portion of the world wants him locked up, even though he’d almost killed you. You will never know what that kind of betrayal feels like, Steve, while Tony can never forget. Second times the charm, right?”

Steve’s eyes widened at that. Was he really on a level with Stane? Really? Was that really what they all thought? That he’d purposefully hurt everyone? Hurt the team? Hurt Tony?

“Natasha, I- You can’t possibly think I’d…” he shook his head as he trailed off. “I would never do that.”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” she said. “I would have said, before all this, that you would never have done half the things you did since the Accords were brought to our attention, but I would have been wrong.”

“Natasha…” he shook his head, wanting to reach out to her, but knowing he’d lose a hand if he tried.

“Doesn’t matter now,” she shrugged. “What’s done, is done. I only came down here to tell you that you and Clint have a meeting scheduled with Director Fury for 0800 hrs tomorrow morning at SHIELD. A car will be here at 0730 hrs to pick you both up and take you to the meeting. Also, King T’Challa will be in touch with you in the next day or two to update you on Barnes’s recovery status.”
He nodded in acknowledgement, distracted by his own thoughts before he opened his mouth to ask a question that had been bothering him. "Why did you help us back there then? When you let us go; why did you do it if you still believed the Accords to be right?"

"I didn’t believe the Accords were right, I believed their intent was right. Is right. For us, for what we do, oversight is necessary. The public needs to be protected by us and from us. That has never changed. I let you go, because I realized you were right about Ross and there was no way he wasn’t going to try to make an example of you guys if he got the chance. The thing that you didn’t know, but would have had you talked to us was that Tony has never trusted General Ross – ex-General now – and the moment he showed up, Accords in hand, Tony suspected something more was going on. We just needed to play along long enough to figure out what his game was – and maybe also find a way to appease all those countries that had begun to fear us as much, at least, as they feared another alien attack."

"I really fucked up, didn’t I?" he sighed, looking down at his feet and not really looking for a reply.

"We all did in some way," she shrugged. "Maybe we can fix it, all of us together, before it’s broken beyond repair."

"'Beyond repair'? What are you talking about, Natasha?"

"I think…" she frowned and trailed off before trying again. "I’m certain that Tony is thinking of retiring Iron Man. Permanently this time."

"What!?" he exclaimed, incredulous and not just a little hurt. "No. He-he can’t do that."

She just looked him.

"Are you sure?"

"That he will quit? No," she shook her head. "But I am certain he’s thinking about it. We have time yet though. Banner will be back tomorrow. It will do him some good to have the rest of us here. And you might want to steer clear of Bruce for a few days, too. Last I heard the Big Guy isn’t very happy with you."

"I’m not surprised," he said. Tony and Bruce had always had a connection between them. And Tony was the first of them to accept the Hulk without any reservations. It made sense that the Hulk was as fond of Tony as Tony was of him.

"Yeah," she nodded, trying not to smile at the thought of Steve running from a green tinged Bruce. "I’m sure Thor will protect you. Maybe. If he’s here. He was a bit disappointed in – and I quote – ‘the Captain’s dishonorable conduct against our man of iron’, end quote."

"How does he even…?" he shook his head.

"Heimdall sees all," she shrugged.

He rolled his eyes at the smirk on her face – a smirk that didn’t quite reach her eyes – but refrained from commenting. What could he say? He wasn’t sure he had anything that would suffice. Maybe he really had been too caught up in getting Bucky back that he missed seeing everything else in front of his eyes. If he remembered right, Sam had tried telling him the same thing a few times while it was all happening, but he wasn’t hearing him either. He wasn’t listening to anybody but himself through all of it.
And he still had nightmares about what he’d almost done to Tony.

“Well, I’m going to bed,” she said, turning around on silent feet and heading for the elevator. “And tell Clint if I even suspect he’s been hiding in the vents in my area or step foot anywhere on my floor he’s going to regret it.”

“You know, he only followed me to protect his family, right?”

“I know,” she said turning to look at him as she stepped on the elevator. “But his family was never in any danger. Tony had already made sure there was no record linking Laura and the children to Clint the moment he saw that registration proposal in that draft of the Accords, not that it was necessary since Fury had made sure to never put his family or their location in any file that SHIELD had access to. Clint knew that. I know I can’t expect him to put blind trust in Tony as he hasn’t known him that long, but he should have trusted me, trusted Fury. He should have known I would never allow any harm to come to his family. Now he may lose them anyway and he only has himself to blame.”

Steve stared, eyes wide as she pressed the button for her floor and watched as the doors closed. What did she mean? Was she serious? Was Laura thinking of leaving Clint or something? Had he broken up a marriage when he’d called Clint? He’d never asked the retired assassin to join him… but maybe he shouldn’t have called him in the first place. Maybe he should have left him out of it like Natasha had done. He’s sure she had thought of calling the archer, if only for a moment, but knew she hadn’t. He needed to talk to Clint and find out if there was anything he could do. Maybe he could talk to Laura and tell her that everything was his fault? He hated to think that he had destroyed another family.

God, everything was falling apart.

He’d thought, when he’d received the news from T’Challa that they could return to the States, that everything was going to be better or at least go back to the way they were, but now Steve was starting to see just how far the dominoes had fallen. He’d thought that at least their foundation, the Avengers, was intact when he saw the news talking about the prospect of new members joining the team, but now he wasn’t so sure.

The Avengers just might end up being an entirely new team altogether.

And it would be all his fault if that happened. Because he was seeing that the trust and friendships he’d once worked so hard to build and maintain were unraveling at the seams and it was more than just the relationship between him and Tony, but his relationship with the entire team.

And he had no idea how to even begin to go about fixing it.

“God Bucky….” he sighed aloud, rubbing his hands over his eyes. “I could really use some help right now… Were you right? Was it all not worth it?”

He may not have been expecting a reply to come to him through the air all the way from Wakanda where his old friend was possibly still frozen, but he also didn’t expect the lights in the lab to shut down and go completely dark on him either. Even the lights to the elevator were out.

He sighed. It seemed he was taking the stairs up the thirty flights it would take to get to his floor. Steve made a note to himself to never again piss off an intelligent computer who could pretty much make his life a living hell without breaking a sweat.
Chapter II

Natasha woke with a start, hand reaching for the glock she had under her pillow before she realized there was no one else in her room but her. She sighed as she relaxed and flipped to lie on her back. She stared at the ceiling above as she wondered what had been in her dreams to have given her such a violent wake up.

It could have been any number of things, Natasha knew, from the last few months to the last few years. Her time with the Red Room was full of possibilities, which Wanda could testify to as she’d once used those very memories against her. There was much in her life that she knew she would never forget and even more that she regretted and all of it would provide her with nightmares for the rest of her life, but Natasha had a feeling that this night’s dream was different than the norm. This dream was about desire and want and knowing she would never ever have it. She didn’t know how she knew that when she couldn’t even remember her dream, but she knew.

And it was as painful as any nightmare before it.

Natasha rubbed a hand over her face as she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. It was no use trying to sleep any more, it would be a while before she could get that calm back that she needed to find rest. She looked at the clock and arched a brow, deciding it was late and early enough for a nice cup of Earl Grey. She got up and grabbed her robe on the way out thinking her pajamas was enough clothing for 3:00 am.

Natasha hit the button for the common floor as she entered the lift then looked to one of the cameras she knew was hidden in one of the corners of the ceiling though she couldn’t actually see it.

“FRIDAY, tell me Tony is sleeping.”

“I could do that, Ms. Natasha, but that would be lying,” replied the A.I.

Natasha’s eyes sharpened then. Of course he wasn’t sleeping… She didn’t know why she asked.

“How is he?”

“You already know the answer to that question,” she confirmed with a hint of sadness in her voice, “Where he often can be found at this time of night lately. Boss did get some sleep though before waking not too long ago; approximately four hours and eighteen minutes worth.”

“That’s good,” nodded Natasha as the doors opened on the communal floor. She hit the button to close the doors again, quickly changing her mind and destination. “Take me to him, FRIDAY.”

“Of course, Ms. Natasha.”
Natasha sighed, but gave a small grin. There were a few perks to making it into Tony Stark’s inner circle; and she wasn’t thinking of the monetary kind. Not many had and therefore, not many were able to say they’d seen what she was about to witness. And it was a true shame, because it was a glorious sight to behold. To her, *this* is what earned Tony his genius status.

Natasha took a calming breath then stepped off the lift when the doors opened on the secret floor. It was located directly below Tony’s personal penthouse floor, but the lift had no button to reach it, only FRIDAY could take you there, so most assumed the floor directly below Tony’s was Steve’s, even she had until FRIDAY had brought her here for the first time. She had been honored later when she’d learned from Pepper that only Rhody and Pepper had ever been there before Natasha.

Immediately after stepping from the lift she could hear him. Natasha froze; closing her eyes as she silently listened. It was hauntingly beautiful, she thought as she stood there just outside the lift, but oh so sad. It made her feel not just alone, but isolated like you know you’re not alone by choice and that sad hope that it will change. Someone will find you… and it won’t be just you anymore.

Natasha opened her eyes, blinking away the moisture there as she rubbed a hand over her heart before she moved forward towards the double doors standing closed before her. She could hear the song winding down and knew it was coming to a close as she opened the door silently on well-oiled hinges. She let the door close behind her in the small moment of silence before he started a new piece.

Gently she leaned back against the doors, hands holding the knobs behind her back as she quietly observed him, waiting for him to acknowledge her as she was sure he knew she was there. He was hunched over the black baby grand, eyes never leaving the keys as his fingers flew across them with purpose. With the trills in this one, she could imagine it being played on a stage, possibly in a play or a ballet.

Natasha could see herself dancing to this one.

It was sadness, and pain, and loss. It was being left behind as the world went on without you. It was what Tony felt. And that’s why he only let a few select people in here, because here with the pictures of his mom and the one wall of mirrors similar to where she once danced (and now Natasha sometimes do) he couldn’t hide. Tony masks had no place here.

Here, that little boy who knew loneliness like the back of his hand and cried for the love that had been denied him, still lived.

Natasha’s heart cried for that little boy… and for the man he’d grown up to be, because for him it didn’t have to be this way. Someone should have taken notice, someone other than just Maria Stark and Nick Fury. Howard Stark should have paid attention to his son.

The old engineer was lucky he was already dead; because that was one hit she’d have taken for free.

“Come sit,” he beckoned as he slowly played the last notes of the song, watching her from the corner of his eye.

Natasha’s gaze flicked to his as she let go of her train of thought. She made her way over to him on quiet feet and silently sat down on the bench beside him, barely an inch of space between them.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked as he took in the short-shorts and tank she was wearing beneath her thigh length robe that he recognized as he’d seen the pajama set before.
“I did,” she replied.

“Nightmare,” he nodded, not needing to ask. “Want to talk about it?”

“Don’t really remember it.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder as she listened to the song come to a quiet end. “What’s it called?”

He took a moment before replying, still not comfortable with opening up. If someone had told him even a year ago that Natasha Romanoff, SHIELD spy extraordinaire and all around badass, would be one of his most important people he’d have laughed in their face. And probably had FRIDAY deplete their bank accounts and donate it all to a charity for clowns or something ridiculous like that. Now, he couldn’t really imagine her not being here with him. Even when she had to lay low after helping Rogers and Barnes get away, she’d been trying to help him. She’d been the one to find Bruce and get the info they needed to bring down ex-General Ross.

“Abandoned,” he answered, fighting to keep his voice normal without any inflections for her to decipher. Not that the title wasn’t telling, he thought as he felt her gaze on him.

“So Bruce will be here soon,” he started, trying to take the focus off himself.

“Yes.”

He rolled his eyes and tilted his head on top of hers for a moment. “Don’t make me beg, Nat, because you know I’ll do it.”

Natasha grinned, knowing he was telling the truth. After a silent moment she turned sideways on the bench, bringing her bent knees to her chest as she rested her socked feet on the bench. She wrapped her arms around her legs as she rested the back of her head on his shoulder, looking at the intricate design on the ceiling above them in contemplation.

“There’s nothing to tell,” she finally spoke, telling him what she had not told anyone else. “We’ve talked, many times, but never about us. He hasn’t brought it up and neither have I. I didn’t think there was really any point to try before anyway as he’d never given any indication he was coming back.”

“You knew he would be back,” he said quietly, eyes staring at his hands resting on the black and white keys before him. “I knew, so you knew.”

“I knew,” she conceded, but didn’t say that neither of them had any idea as to when though. She didn’t have to.

“And now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied, quietly. And she didn’t know. She had no idea what Bruce wanted if he wanted anything from her at all. Acting on a rare bout of honesty, she decided to speak her fears. “What if he doesn’t want me anymore?”

Tony sighed as he tilted his head slightly to press gently against hers in a show of comfort. “I doubt that’s possible.”

“Happens,” she whispered, turning her head sideways to look at the piano as he began to play. “I’m not like other girls.”
“No, you’re not, but that’s not a bad thing. Not in your case,” he said with a slight shrug of his unoccupied shoulder. Tony played slowly as he closed his eyes. It demanded slow, to be felt and not just heard. It wasn’t a physical pain, but one that sat deep beneath the skin. The kind that crippled. He decided he wouldn’t tell her the name of this one. Not yet. “Besides, he’s not like other boys, so I doubt he’d hold that against you and anyone who has before didn’t deserve you anyway.” Then he smirked and added, “And probably couldn’t handle you.”

“Hmm,” she grinned for a moment, deciding to let that last comment slide this one time. “Tell me this one?”

“Tell you another time,” he replied then quickly followed with a question of his own before she could beat the answer out of him. “You think he’s why you had a nightmare tonight?”

“Possibly,” she answered, allowing the subject change as she knew he’d keep to his word. “It’s the more plausible answer, anyway.”

“Mmm.”

Tony continued to play, quietly letting the subject drop and they continued this way until FRIDAY quietly let them know that the sun was beginning to rise and reminding him that he had a board meeting to attend at 11 o’clock that morning that Pepper was not going to let him miss. They separated when Natasha got off the lift on her floor after placing a gentle kiss to his cheek and ordering him to get a few more hours sleep and promising that she was going to do the same.

Tony squeezed her hand and nodded to her as the doors closed and FRIDAY began taking him to his penthouse floor. For once, that was an order he had every intention of following, he thought, as he quietly instructed FRIDAY to wake him up at ten if he wasn’t up already as he stepped out on his floor. FRIDAY’s easy confirmation was the last thing he heard as his head hit the pillow.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~

Dr. Bruce Banner stood on the sidewalk looking up at the tower in front of him, slowly taking it all in. He couldn’t believe he was back here already. When he’d left over two years ago he’d had no idea when or if he’d be returning to this place or the Avengers. Of course, he’d never expected Ross to come back and try to get at him through hurting his friends.

It was really dumb of Ross to take on the Avengers; it was even dumber to take on an angry Tony Stark.

Didn’t the world know it was only the genius’s inherent goodness that kept him from becoming the greatest villain the world could ever conceive? The things his mind was capable of couldn’t be measured and to add to that he also had the ability to make those unlikely thoughts a reality. And to top it off, his natural charisma guaranteed he’d have tons of followers. He imagined if something were ever to change Tony and make him into that villain only someone like Professor Xavier or Dr. Strange would stand a chance at stopping him. The thought was a daunting one, but he didn’t worry, because Tony was one of the most caring people he knew.

All of The Avengers could be formidable enemies, really. Perhaps that’s what the world was finally realizing and what had truly started this cluster fuck, he thought with a shake of his head.

“Greetings Dr. Banner,” boomed Thor as he walked up beside Bruce and nearly caused the poor man to flinch. “It is good to see you well!”
Bruce grinned at the huge blonde and nodded. He could never stay mad in the face of the alien god’s eternal joy. “Hello Thor. Are you just arriving as well?”

“Aye,” nodded Thor, “I had not thought I’d be seeing you so soon when we last parted, but I have need of Tony Stark’s aid and grave news to impart to the Avengers.”

Bruce arched a brow at that, but did not ask questions, guessing that Thor would probably prefer to say what he had to say once. “I see. And how is the fair Jane?”

“My Lady Jane fairs very well,” he said with a broad smile stretching across his face. “I thank you for your concern. And you, doctor, how do you fair? Have you completed your sabbatical?”

Bruce sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it as he returned his gaze to the building’s entrance, “How about we find out?”

Thor grinned at the doctor as he dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Of course, doctor. Let us see how the rest of our fellow Avengers fair, for I have not heard great tidings.”

“Yeah…” Bruce sighed as he followed the other man inside. If that wasn’t the king of understatements he didn’t know what was.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Steve rubbed at his temples as he stepped on to the elevator and hit the button for the communal floor. Laura still wasn’t speaking to Clint unless it had to do with the children, which meant Clint was still moping. And it didn’t help that Natasha was also still refusing to speak to the archer.

He never should have called Clint.

Steve believed that now and the guilt was killing him. Well, that on top of the guilt over what he’d done to Tony… it didn’t matter that neither Clint nor Laura seemed to hold him responsible; he held himself responsible. The fact was had he never asked Clint for help then the other man would have never made the decision to leave his family. Maybe it was a promise Clint never should have made to his wife and children when he knew he couldn’t walk away from being Hawkeye so easily, but it didn’t take away Steve’s guilt.

And to add to all of that he was pretty certain Tony was avoiding him again.

He knew their resident billionaire had a meeting with the SI board scheduled for eleven that morning, but in the past Tony would have stopped in the kitchen for a cup of a coffee (or two or three) on his way out and to say good morning to Steve. He’d made sure to be in the communal kitchen just in case routine would still prove true. It hadn’t.

Now it was currently after five and he hadn’t seen nor heard neither Tony nor Natasha all day. In a tower full of people all he’d spoken to and seen were Sam and Clint and exchanged quick pleasantries with Laura on her way out to see the children to school. Wanda appeared to only be speaking regularly to Vision and, if the ever present sadness on her face was any indication, that wasn’t going so well. And Scott, probably the most innocent out of all of them, was currently making arrangements to get home to his daughter, which was proving a bit difficult as they were all – those of them that had been hiding in Wakanda – currently under house arrest. They couldn’t go more than 500 feet from the tower without violating he didn’t know how many laws. He’d had to use the treadmill in the gym for his morning runs since their return.
“FRIDAY,” he asked as he looked up at the ceiling, trying once more, “could you tell me if Tony has returned from his meeting with the board?”

He was met with silence. Steve sighed after a moment and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was safe to assume the A.I was very much still cross with him. It seemed she’d now decided to take a page from her predecessor’s book and was now displaying her displeasure with him by using the silent treatment over the sassy remarks she’d used to give him, though he doubted he’d heard the last of her cutting sarcasm. She really was her creator’s daughter, he thought with a shake of his head. He knew with time she would be able to anticipate her creator’s needs without him having to ask, becoming just as impressive as JARVIS had been.

Didn’t stop him from missing the very British A.I. – after all, JARVIS had never tried to kill him on the treadmill when he was angry with Steve. Then again, he’d never almost killed Tony on the butler A.I’s watch… He figured had that happened JARVIS would have figured out a way to get rid of him and his remains without anyone ever being the wiser. It was no secret how protective JARVIS had been of Tony; he’d often wondered if it was a feature that Tony added or if it was a character trait of the human Jarvis that the AI had been designed after?

He hoped it was the latter as it warmed something inside him to know that Tony had at least had one person in his life that had always put him and his well-being first; that the engineer knew what it felt like to have someone he knew would always choose him.

Maybe he shouldn’t complain about FRIDAY’s treatment of him, after all, he thought as he stepped off the elevator on to the common floor. It was obvious now he was getting off pretty lightly and, if the looks Rhodey sent him whenever their paths crossed were any indication, he was. Because he was pretty sure Tony’s James would very much like to put Steve back in the ice – or, at the very least, ship him back to Wakanda. Without the use of a plane.

“Oh Bucky,” he sighed as he moved towards the kitchen. “I could really use some advice right now…”

“Well, I’m no ‘Bucky’, but I can take a crack at it if you want. Fair warning though, I doubt I’ll be as bias in my opinions or in the same direction as Bucky.”

Steve started at the voice and spun around to face the living room. He was so in his head he hadn’t noticed anyone in the room when he’d entered.

“Dr. Banner… and Thor…” he blinked at the two men as he shifted his gaze from one to the other, surprised to see the latter. “I didn’t see you guys sitting there.”

“Captain,” nodded Bruce as he met the super-soldier’s gaze. “We noticed. You seemed to be deep in thought.” Thor nodded at Steve then, but he wasn’t sure whether it was in agreement to his words or a silent greeting from the god. “My offer still stands, of course.”

Steve nodded in acknowledgement, but refrained from giving any type of answer, one way or another. “It’s good to see you too,” he smiled and tried not to wince when the doctor gave that smile of his that never failed to leave one wondering if he was laughing at you or himself, but feeling distinctly like it was you. “Glad to have you both back.”

“We are also happy to have returned,” said Thor with a nod, speaking for the first time, but not at his usual booming volume.

“Well, I can say the return wasn’t bad,” shrugged Bruce, grin still in place. “I must say, I’ve heard quite a few stories while I was away and on my way here,” he added as he continued to watch
Steve nodded, unsure what to say to that statement. He was pretty certain that at least Natasha had spoken to the doctor, but he wasn’t sure of what all she would have told him… and there were, of course, a few things that she couldn’t have.

Of course, Tony very well could have.

“Where are the others?” asked Thor as he looked between the two men. He knew the good doctor was doing everything to keep his calm at the moment, so he figured a little change in subject would do both men some good. “No one else has come to greet us upon our return. It is most disconcerting.”

“Ahh, well…” Steve blinked at the change in topic, but decided to just be thankful for the small reprieve. From the expression on Bruce’s face he was sure it wasn’t going to last long. “Natasha should be sparring with Sam last I heard. Clint is probably not too far from his kids; as they should be back at the tower by now. Wanda is probably hiding out in her room still,” and wasn’t that ironic, he thought. Once she had to be broken out of there, she wanted out so bad; now you had to bribe her with food to get her to even think about leaving it. He shook his head, shutting down that train of thought before he could say something he wouldn’t really mean. “Vision is probably in a session with Rhodes and I don’t know where Tony is. I know he had a board meeting to attend this morning,” he added with a shrug.

“That’s convenient,” breathed Bruce with another grin.

Steve arched a brow, but didn’t comment. He wasn’t quite sure what the other man meant and didn’t think he wanted to know. “I’m sure FRIDAY has let Tony and the rest know you’re here,” he said instead. “You’ve been gone a long time. A lot has happened.”

“Why don’t you give us your version of events while we wait for the others?” suggested Bruce with a tilt of his head.

Steve stared back at the doctor in contemplation. It didn’t escape his notice how the doctor had worded his request and he figured he should be grateful the men were allowing him to give his version of events despite what they may have heard from other parties. Steve nodded and pushed his shoulders back, deciding to approach this as he did any battle. He moved to take a seat in one of the plush sofa chairs then waited for the other two men to do the same.

“Well, after you two left both Tony and Clint decided to retire for their own personal reasons, as you already know, Thor;” he nodded at the god. “It was okay, though, because we gained War Machine with Lt. Colonel Rhodes, Sam Wilson as the Falcon and both Wanda and Vision decided to stay on and I had hope that Tony would return once he was ready.”

“So Tony had quit…” said Bruce thoughtfully. “I wondered if he would. Ultron and what happened in Sokovia hit him hard… and with the loss of JARVIS…”

“Yeah,” Steve sighed and nodded in understanding. Though Tony had never spoken to him about it he knew what happened in Sokovia and the loss of JARVIS were the main factors in Tony deciding to step back from the Avengers back then and not just his want to work on his relationship with Pepper at the time. He’d always hoped that Tony would come back, would talk to him, but more time had passed and then Ross and the Accords happened and… well, nothing went how Steve had wanted or hoped and he knew he was partly to blame for that.

“Anyway,” he continued, needing to move on and get it all out. “Time went on and Nat and I
trained the new Avengers. It was good. We didn’t work together as smoothly as we all did, but we were getting there. A year passed then we got the intel on Lagos and Nat and I took the team there to stop the threat….”

Both men listened closely as Steve continued to tell them everything that happened since they’d been gone. And as Steve thoroughly held both men’s attention none of them noticed as they were joined in the sitting room.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

“Boss?”

“Mm? What is it, FRIDAY?” replied Tony, absently. He was currently studying the 3-D image of a new prototype for SI. Something was wrong with the virtual reality component of the tech and R&D, after a week of trying, couldn’t figure out what the problem was. Pepper had finally dumped the issue in Tony’s lap. “Put up the VR program specs and data along-side for me, please.”

He rotated the image in the air before him with the swipe of his finger as he waited the moment it took for FRIDAY to comply. “Thank you,” he nodded as he began to go over the data before him.

“Of course,” answered FRIDAY, who then continued undeterred. “Boss, Dr. Banner is still in the common room. Don’t you think it would be polite for you to go greet him?”

“What? Oh, Bruce? Didn’t I tell you to let Nat know he was here?” he asked, still not giving the matter his full attention. He was sure Bruce wouldn’t mind if he saw him later and he figured perhaps him and Natasha could use the time to talk. “Nat is perfectly capable of greeting Bruce and showing him to his floor if he’s forgotten where it is.”

“I have informed Ms. Natasha of the doctor’s arrival, boss, but I think it would be a good idea for you to also put in an appearance. Sooner rather than later.”

“What? Why?” he finally stopped studying the data before him and turned his full attention to his A.I. “What’s going on, FRIDAY? Remember, cryptic is not cute.”

“Captain Rogers discovered Dr. Banner first and is now currently in the common room with him.”

“They’re not destroying my tower are they? Because that would be bad, unsurprising, but bad.”

“No, but Captain Rogers is currently telling Dr. Banner all that has happened in his absence.”

“I see,” he blinked. That… well, that could be bad. “I can understand where you might be concerned, but Bruce was bound to find out.”

“Of course, boss, but that is not the problem.”

“Than what’s the problem, FRIDAY?” he asked, curiosity peaked. “Come on, spit it out. You know I’m busy here. If I don’t have this fixed in 48 hours we will have Pepper down here glaring and being all frowny because she’ll have nothing for the board and if that happens I’m blaming it all on you, FRIDAY.”

“She’d never believe you,” the A.I. replied and Tony frowned at the shrug he could hear in her voice and the fact she was probably right. “Everyone else has joined Captain Rogers and Dr. Banner in the common room and the captain is currently telling of his breaking the others out of the Raft, but he has conveniently left out a certain incident that I’m certain Dr. Banner will have picked up on.”
A certain incid- Oh. Though Bruce was aware of what happened in Siberia, he didn’t know everything. He was pretty sure none of them did. Tony knew he hadn’t told anyone, not even Rhodey and Pepper and if Steve was completely skipping over it while telling Bruce than he figured it was reasonable to assume he hadn’t told any of the others either. And Barnes was still frozen in Wakanda.

If Bruce decided to ask… Would he? He was usually a pretty laid back person, allowing people their secrets. Bruce Banner knew what it was like to have things you didn’t want to talk about and for that reason wasn’t usually one to pry.

But this was different. This was part of the reason he returned… and he’d want to know.

Tony stood, mind quickly running through all the possibilities and none of them ending well. “Okay, this could be a problem,” he said as he started running for the elevator, thankful when it opened right up for him. “FRIDAY!”

“Ms. Natasha is already in the common room, boss, as well as the Colonel.”

Oh, this might just turn out worse than he imagined.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

“So you got them out of The Raft…” said Bruce with a nod.

“Yeah,” nodded Clint as he folded his arms across his chest. “Cap doesn’t abandon his team, which is more than I can say for Stark, who put us in there in the first place.”

“Clint.”

“Is that right?” asked Bruce, speaking over Steve with a raise of his eyebrows as he looked around at the nods from some of the occupants in the room. “I know The Raft. High security prison sitting at the bottom of the Atlantic, impenetrable with a state of the art security system,” he nodded, ignoring the sharp, knowing look Natasha turned his way as he set his gaze directly on Clint.

“I may not have had the distinct pleasure of visiting the place, but I do know it very well. It was, after all, built in the Big Guy’s honor,” he added with a smirk that didn’t reach his eyes. “And it was created to house those criminals with certain abilities that the nation’s ordinary prisons aren’t equipped to handle.”

“Then you know the hell that place is,” said Clint with a small but tense nod. He could sense there was something off, but he couldn’t quite see where. He tried to look to Nat for help, but she wasn’t meeting his gaze.

“I do,” Bruce nodded. And since everyone else, besides Thor, currently had their backs to the entrance they were the only two to notice Tony quietly enter the room. “Want to know what else I know?” he asked with a smile that showed his teeth. “I know that the good General, Thaddeus Ross, is a scared bigot with a superiority complex and years ago he made sure The Raft was strong enough to hold someone like me; there are rooms in that place that have bars made of Adamantium, an alloy that could probably only be matched by Vibranium in its indestructability. It also has the best security system on the planet. It has never been defeated despite some of the best minds in the world trying.”

Clint blinked as he felt the hairs on his arms begin to stand. He exchanged questioning looks with both Wanda and Scott before he turned his confused gaze on Bruce. If The Raft was that strong…
He looked over at Steve, arching a brow in question.

“Wait,” spoke up Sam with a similar frown on his face. “What exactly are you saying, man?”

Bruce aimed a slightly curious look at the unknown man before replying. “What I’m saying is no one gets in or out of The Raft without some inside knowledge or help. No one,” he paused and then shrugged before adding, “Well except maybe Thor, but he’s a god so he doesn’t count.”

“I didn’t have a problem with the security system at all, really,” chimed in Steve as he looked between the two.

“Really?” asked Clint, looking towards Steve in surprise.

“That’s convenient,” nodded Bruce as Steve shook his head. “Maybe they were having an off day,” he suggested with a shrug as everyone turned their gaze to him. “Or maybe you all had a little more help then you thought? I, for one, only know of one person who could create or possibly hack a system like that… but, I could be wrong. I’m sure a simple check of who holds the contract for The Raft’s security would easily settle that question.”

Clint eyes widened as he exchanged a look with Sam, shaking his head. “No way, man. Someone look that shit up. There’s no fucking way I’m owing my freedom to fucking Stark.”

“You already do,” said Natasha with an arch of her brow as she crossed her arms in front of her. “And you’re all welcome to look it up if you want, but Stark Industries does hold the security contract for The Raft. Have done for the last ten years.”

“How do you know?” asked Steve, not doubting she was right just curious as to how she would know that.

“I did work for SI as Tony’s personal assistant for over a year,” she replied with a shrug. “I worked closely with Pepper on many SI projects. You’d be surprised to know just how many places SI, and therefore Tony, holds security contracts with. At the time, I didn’t know what The Raft was, but I do know the contract currently belongs to Stark Industries.”

“I don’t understand,” spoke up Scott with a confused look around the room. “Why would Stark help get us out after putting us in there? Because that’s what you’re all saying right? So why?”

“That’s a goo- Wait. Who are you?” asked Bruce curiously as he turned to Sam. “You, I remember now. You’re the one who likes to sight see while Cap runs around the city and you were helping him search for The Winter Soldier. Who is he?”

“Seriously?” asked Scott, offended. “Don’t you people watch the news at all?”

“Not if I can help it,” shrugged Clint. “It’s so depressing.”

“It really is,” nodded Sam in agreement. “And Cap and Iron Man are the most popular Avengers. And if that Everheart chic calls me The Bald Eagle one more time I am going to send her a strongly worded nasty gram.”

Natasha arched a brow at him with a slight smile, but said nothing. That one was too easy and she wasn’t that mean.

Clint didn’t have that problem though. He opened his mouth to make a retort, but was stopped by Steve before he could make a sound.
“Clint, no,” said Steve with a glare in the archer’s direction before turning back to the doctor. “His name is Scott Lang, also known as Ant Man.”

Bruce nodded and looked at the other man. “Nice to meet you. You work with Hank Pym?”

“You know him?” asked Scott with a nod.

“Mostly by reputation,” replied Bruce. “You asked a good question, but before we get to that I have one of my own,” he added as he turned to look at Steve. “Siberia? I don’t think you mentioned what happened in Siberia.”

Steve stiffened as he stared back at Bruce. He’d been hoping that Bruce didn’t know to ask about that. From the look in his eyes he could tell the doctor knew something about what happened there, but just how much Steve wasn’t sure.

“I didn’t think…,” Steve trailed off as he figured what he almost said probably wouldn’t go over very well. He stood up and crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s not necessary for explaining what happened.”

Natasha looked at him them, her eyes narrowed. Now that she thought about it, she didn’t know what had happened in Siberia either. Tony refused to talk about it, far as she knew.

“Oh I think it’s necessary, Cap,” said Bruce with a small smile; slowly standing up. “I know that FRIDAY had to send a distress call to Pepper so Tony could be retrieved because for some reason he couldn’t do that on his own. I think I’d like to know why that was.”

Silence grew in the room as everyone seemed to look to everyone else for answers, but no one seemed to have anything to say.

Natasha narrowed her eyes at the silent captain before turning her piercing gaze on the thunder God, who’d remained unusually quiet so far. “Thor? Do you know what happened to Tony in Siberia?”

“Aye, I do, Lady Natasha,” said Thor with a sigh, never being one to lie when asked a direct question. He folded his arms across his chest as he looked around at everyone before adding, “But I do not feel it is my story to tell. I am sorry.”

“That’s fine,” said Natasha with an understanding look. She knew what it was like to know something, but to feel it was not yours to share. She wouldn’t press Thor to talk. “Steve?”

Steve opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by another.

“He’s right, Nat, it’s not important. Leave it alone.”

Natasha turned her head, not an ounce of surprise on her face to be seen as she watched Tony push forward between Scott and Wanda to get to her.

“Coming from you, Tony, I find that very hard to believe,” she said as he stopped before her. “You never have told me what happened there and I know you went there to find Steve and Bucky who had headed there to stop the activation of any more Winter Soldiers.” She watched him nod and shrug at the same time, trying to look relaxed. But she’d been around Tony Stark for far too long not to be able to see the stiffness in his shoulders. For some reason he was agitated and uncomfortable and she was sure it only had slightly to do with being in the same room with everyone else. “What happened, Tony?”
“I think I’d like to know, too,” spoke Rhodey, stepping forward, gaze trained on Tony.

“Et tu Bru-dey?!” exclaimed Tony with an exaggerated gasp.

“Yep, me too,” he nodded. “You’ve been hiding something from me since then and at first, I thought it was because you didn’t want to worry me while I’ve been recuperating, but I’m doing much better now – mostly thanks to you – yet you still haven’t told me. The last time you kept a secret from me for this long you were dying.” Rhodey froze then, eyes widening. “Tell me you’re not dying, Tony. You better not be dying or I will take off this leg brace and beat you with it. Yep, you heard me. I will hobble over there and beat you with your own tech. I swear I will-“

“I’m not dying,” he cut in, knowing that Rhodey could threaten him forever if he let him go on any longer. He could also see the fear in his best friend’s eyes and he never wanted to be the cause of that look on Rhodey’s face ever again. He promised himself he wouldn’t be. “I promise, Honey bear, no omens of death I’m keeping to myself.”

Rhodey narrowed his eyes at him for a moment and seeing no deception in his eyes, nodded. “Good. I’d hate to have to kill you. I’m sure I’d have come to regret it and Pepper would probably kill me for beating her to it.”

“No, probably. She would. Probably with a shoe,” he shrugged.

“I blame that on you,” he replied, pointing his finger at the engineer. “Stop supplying her with deadly fashion. She’s going to snap and kill us both one day and it will be all your fault; the why and the how.”

“I tried stuffed animals,” he shrugged and shook his head. “She still doesn’t let me forget that.”

“I’d think you were a size queen if I didn’t know you are,” he sighed, trying not to smile at the smirk that sprouted on Tony’s face. “There’s giant and then there’s giant, Tony. Generally, if it can’t get through the door, leave it where you found it.”

“Maybe I’ll help her,” interrupted Natasha with narrowed eyes as both men turned their heads to look at her. “I have extensive knowledge. What happened in Siberia?”

“Nothing happened.”

“If it’s nothing, you can tell us. We don’t get to be bored a lot. It’s a novelty.”

Tony stared at her then looked back at Rhodey, but the traitor only raised his brows as if to say, ‘don’t look at me; I can’t even walk.’

“Fine!” he exclaimed, throwing his hands up. “It’s really not that big a deal. I found out the truth about something and then we had a bit of a disagreement,” he shrugged. “It’s not important.”

“A disagreement?” she questioned, concerned. Tony had a knack for understating anything that caused him harm, be it physical or emotional. “Tony I may not have seen you when you returned, but I did speak to Pepper. She had a laundry list of injuries you had and she said it took nearly an hour to get you out of the suit. She was afraid you were going to die…” she trailed off as she saw him flinch at her words.

“Pepper exaggerates,” he tried to shrug his shoulder, but the motion came off as more of a jerk than a shrug. He was tense. He didn’t like remembering the fear in Pepper’s eyes, nor the tears. “It wasn’t that bad.”
“Yes. It really was,” said Rhodey, a solemn look on his face as he turned his gaze to Steve. “Granted, it was mostly from the hypothermia than any of the physical injuries.”

Natasha looked between Rhodes and Steve before sharing a suspicious look with Sam. She was starting to think she knew what happened, but she was really hoping she was wrong. Shifting her gaze to Steve, she tried to catch his eye but he was keeping his eyes on the floor, refusing to look at anyone. That was not making her feel better.

Turning back to Tony, she was surprised to find his eyes already on her. Her face softened at the pain she saw there. She wanted to reach out to him, but she knew he wouldn’t want it. Not there, surrounded by so many; some he wasn’t sure he could trust anymore and others he’d never trusted.

“Your parents,” said Natasha quietly. “That was the truth you learned.”

He blinked. “You knew,” he breathed as he rubbed a hand on his chest in the spot where the arc reactor used to sit. He watched her nod then nodded himself before looking away. She was his friend, he knew that. He wasn’t going to start doubting her now. Not when he needed her. He would give her the same chance he’d given Rogers. “How long?”

“We all found out at the same time when we learned about Hydra being S.H.I.E.L.D,” she answered honestly, seeing no point in lying. Natasha could see the hurt her words caused him, but she would not hide from her responsibility in all this. She owed him that much.

“What’s going on here?” asked Rhodey, looking between the two. He didn’t like the look on Tony’s face or in Natasha’s eyes. “What are you two talking about?”

“We?” asked Tony, ignoring his friend’s question as he returned his gaze to her. He didn’t have it in him right now to explain to Rhodey.

“Steve, Sam and I,” she replied with a sigh. “When we first started searching for more info on the Winter Soldier.”

He nodded. That… that made sense, really. Tony rubbed a hand over his mouth as he wondered if he really should ask his next question. He and Natasha had come so far… he really didn’t want to lose that, lose her.

But he needed to know.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We weren’t that close back then,” she said with a shake of her head. “Honestly, I figured you would handle it better if it came from Steve. I thought about telling Rhodes or Pepper and having one of them tell you, but I didn’t think it would be right for me to tell someone else without your consent. I assumed Steve would have…,” she blinked then looked at Steve before turning back to Tony. “You didn’t know at all before Siberia?”

“No,” he looked away from her then.

“But…,” Natasha studied him. He had no reason to lie about that and why would he? She turned to look at Sam, uncertain what to say.

“You’re kidding me, right?” asked Sam in disbelief. He almost reached out when Tony turned his glassy gaze on him. ‘I’m so sorry, Stark,” he shook his head. “I’d have told you, but I didn’t know you then.”
The room fell silent then as no one seemed to want to say anything with the obvious pain on Tony’s face.

“Alright, could someone fill me in here? Please?” said Clint, agitated. The silence was finally getting to him and he didn’t like being out of the loop. “What the hell are you all talking about? What truth about Stark’s parents?”

Natasha continued to watch Tony and when she saw him draw himself in and pull his mask on she turned to answer Clint’s question, ignoring her impulse to hit him for his insensitivity seeing as he was only asking what everyone else was thinking.

“Howard and Maria Stark didn’t die in a car accident; they were killed by the Winter Soldier, James Barnes,” she told them quietly, cutting her eyes to Steve before continuing. “Steve, Sam and I found out when we learned the truth about Hydra and S.H.I.E.L.D. Hydra had apparently sent out the Winter Soldier to kill the Starks and then made it look like an accident.”

“Holy shit,” said Clint, eyes wide. He turned to Tony then. “And you found this out when you chased Steve and Bucky down in Siberia?”

“The visual was overkill, if you ask me,” he tried to snark, but it didn’t really come across as planned. He really didn’t need the video evidence.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me… that was over three years ago,” he exclaimed, turning to look at a silent Steve. “Steve? What the hell, man? Let me guess, after seeing that footage and Bucky standing right there in front of him... Stark snapped didn’t he?”

“Not right then,” Tony replied, looking away. “I first asked Rogers what I asked Nat.”

“What did he say?” Natasha asked, eyes on Steve.

“He lied,” he replied, voice void of any emotion. When her gaze snapped to him he shrugged. “Said he suspected they were murdered, but didn’t know by who, but he admitted the truth soon after. Then I snapped. Not my finest moment, I admit.”

“And you ended up fighting two super soldiers, alone. Right?” spoke up Rhodey, anger pouring out of every inch of his being. “That’s what all those injuries were from, isn’t it. You snapped and tried to kill Barnes, and I’m sure the Captain didn’t just stand back and let that happen. Not after all he’d been doing to protect him. So you fought both of them didn’t you? Two super soldiers!”

“I-“

“Don’t lie to me, Tony,” he cut him off with a finger in his friend’s face. “Don’t you dare. Not right now. You fought them and they beat you up, practically destroyed the armor and just left you there.”

“Hey. I gave just as good, too,” he said, his hand rubbing his chest. “They got a lucky shot.”

“Which one was it?” Rhodey asked, ignoring him. He’d seen the state Tony was in after lying in the freezing cold, stuck in a metal coffin for hours. “Which one of them crushed the arc reactor in your suit and left you lying in a metal coffin? In Siberia, Tony! Siberia! If FRIDAY hadn’t been able to… before she was disabled… Tony.”

“I know, okay, I know!” Tony burst out. He was so tired, tired of all of this. He’d come up here to prevent this very thing happening and he’d failed. Now he just wanted out. “I know I fucked up. I really do. I know. Can we please not do this right now? Please?” he looked away then, blinking
his eyes. He would not cry here. He would not give them that satisfaction. “I tried to protect everyone, to keep us from falling apart and I failed. Later, okay? Later, you can yell at and pamper me all you want. I won’t even complain. Okay, maybe one complaint. Two, tops. But right now… I can’t right now.” Tony shook his head as he backed towards the door and freedom. He exchanged one last look with both Rhodey and Natasha before turning and leaving the room.

“Bruce, Thor, great to see you guys. Glad your back,” he called over his shoulder as he stepped on the elevator, so thankful for FRIDAY and her knowing to keep the elevator waiting for him. “We should catch up later.”

The room was completely silent in his wake. Everyone trying to process what they’d just learned without looking anyone in the eye. Clint saw Wanda staring at the elevator after Tony and wondered what was going through her head. “Wanda?”

“I am fine, Clint,” she replied, gaze still on the elevator doors. “I am just learning that nothing is as I thought. I have made a mistake.”

“What mistake?” he asked, but after moments passed with no reply he figured she was not ready to answer him. Clint turned to look at Steve then. He was also staring at the elevator doors, but where Wanda seemed to be deep in thought, Steve just looked full of guilt and pain. “Steve,” he waited for murky blue eyes to meet his, “Was any of this about the Accords? Ever?”

Silence reigned.

“Excuse me, I need some air,” spoke Bruce, his back stiff as he met everyone’s eyes. He knew his own were glowing a bright green and he could see the wariness in them. Good. The Big Guy was very close to the surface and he knew he needed to get away before he lost the will to hold him back. He felt Thor give his shoulder a squeeze before he moved in the direction of the stairs. “I suggest no one come looking for me.”

Rhodey watched the doctor leave before he turned to look at the rest of the occupants in the room. He noted both Natasha and Vision were no longer present and wondered for a moment when they had slipped out before his gaze fell on the Captain.

“Tony may not have answered my question, but if I was a betting man I’d put everything I own on you being the one to have broken the arc reactor, Captain,” he said, voice hard and eyes like steel. “I don’t blame you for wanting to protect your friend and I don’t even blame you for fighting Tony, because I know him better than anyone and he really loved his mother. But breaking the arc reactor and disabling the suit like that then leaving him there, alone, in a frozen wasteland… basically to die in a metal coffin…. That I do blame you for. And I don’t forgive you.”

“I – I didn’t know what else…” Steve started, looking up at Rhodey. He really didn’t know what else to do at the time. He was just trying to save Bucky… he wasn’t thinking. He didn’t think.

“No!” shouted Rhodey, not in any mood for excuses. “No. You had options. There are always options! You chose to leave him for dead. Your choices have us here now.” He shook his head then. “And no, I’m not saying you’re the only one to blame in all this, but for what happened in Siberia… yeah, you are.”

“I’m sorry…” breathed Steve, trying to hold back the tears.

“You know… right now, I don’t give a fuck,” he growled, the steel back in his voice. “Stay away from him, Cap. I mean it. You don’t deserve him and until I feel you do, you will keep away. Don’t push me on this. I may not be able to run too well right now, but my aim is just as good as
your James and I don’t really have a problem with putting a bullet between those baby blues right now.” Rhodey stared Steve down for a moment longer before turning and heading for the elevator. After stepping in he turned to face the open doors to find all eyes on him, including Steve’s as he met them.

“That was your only warning, Captain,” he said with a nod before hitting the button for the penthouse floor.

“Wow…” breathed Sam into the silence, eyes wide. He blinked. “I really think he meant that…”

“He did,” spoke Wanda and Clint at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

Check out the music links in the fic if you like piano music that will rip your heart out and hand it to you on a silver platter. The creator of them all is Lucas King on YouTube and he is A. GENIUS. I could truly see Tony sitting at a lovely baby grand and destroying me with every note he played... Because he is EVIL.
Chapter III

Okay, I’m a few hours late with this. I’m sorry. I fell asleep after work while editing. I know I need to do another edit run-through, too, but I figured I’d post it now anyway. And thank you, everyone, for your kudos and reviews. I was worried about the reception this would get... Anyway, enjoy. :) ~Duchess

Chapter III

“Lock it down, FRIDAY,” said Tony as he stepped quickly off the elevator into the penthouse. His knees were shaking so bad he stumbled into the wall and had to reach out a hand to steady himself. His heart was racing.

“Boss, your heart rate is escalating too fast,” spoke FRIDAY, deliberately slow. “You need to slow your heart down now or you are in danger of passing out. Shall I call Ms. Potts, boss?”

Tony ignored his A.I as he staggered over to the wet bar. He needed a drink; just a little something to take the edge off. One drink couldn’t hurt. He grabbed a crystal decanter, ignoring the trembling of his hands and uncorked it. He groaned when the sweet, fruity smell hit his nose.

Grape juice.

He looked at the other bottles lined up and quickly remembered they were all filled with soda water or grape juice. He set the decanter back down with a little more force than necessary, frustration in every pore. Tony held tightly to the bar, fingers turning white with the strength of his grip as his rage and humiliation steadily grew.

This was his entire fault. Why couldn’t he ever do anything right?! And fucking Rogers…. He just stood there… saying absolutely nothing! Here he was, trying to protect the image of their precious Captain and he just stood there looking like a kicked puppy! Like this was only Tony’s fault.

“AHHH!!” Tony roared and with a huge sweep of his arms he knocked the crystal decanters and glasses to the floor with a mighty crash. He tripped backwards, hitting the wall, panting as his flash of rage was quickly dying.

“Boss?”

Tony cut his arm through the air, unable to speak. He knew his heart was beating too fast. Didn’t she think he knew that? He could literally feel it pounding in his skin as a cold sweat broke out. His vision was blurring at the edges and he was having a very hard time catching a breath. He knew exactly what this was but he couldn’t seem to stop it.

He rested his burning facing against the welcome coldness of the wall as he fell to his knees, unable to hold himself up any longer. He’d been doing so well, too. He hadn’t had a panic attack in nearly two months… Why now?
“Boss?” asked FRIDAY, again. He imagined he could hear the concern in her voice, but it might just be the panic. “Shall I call Ms. Potts, boss?”

He was shaking his head against the wall before he got the words out. “No, no Pepper,” he said as his head began to pound. She shouldn’t have to keep coming to his rescue; he could do this on his own. Tony could feel his hand shaking as he pressed it against his chest, feeling for his heart as if he could physically make it slow down if he just pressed hard enough. Closing his eyes, he continued trying to fight for whatever air he could get.

“I’m alright, just give me a minute,” he panted.

“Anthony, stop talking and breathe.”

“Wha- Who?” Tony cracked his eyes opened and tried to look around, but couldn’t quite focus his blurry vision enough to really see. He was certain he heard a female voice with an accent he couldn’t place speak to him.

“Do not concern yourself with me. Just listen to my voice and take a deep breath in and hold.” He didn’t know why he was listening to whoever she was; he just did as he was told. “Very good. Now let it out slowly. Good. Again.”

Tony sucked in another deep breath and held then slowly released it. He felt a warmness against his chest as he breathed in deeply three more times. Slowly he uncurled his legs from beneath him, his knees beginning to ache a bit as he remained on the floor leaning against the wall. He didn’t have the will or the energy to get up.

“Very good, boss,” chirped FRIDAY, happily. “Your heart rate is steadily slowing and approaching normal levels. Please do not move, yet. I have sent for Dum-E to bring you something to drink.”

“Scotch?” he breathed, hopefully.

“Water.”

He just loved the women in his life. Even the artificial one was evil.

“Do not worry, Anthony. Things will get better; you will see,” spoke the female voice once more. Tony looked around again now that his vision was not impaired, but again there was no one else in the penthouse with him that he could see. “You are not alone.”

“Who are you?” he asked to the air. “What are you?”

“Boss?”

“That, Anthony, is a question for another time. We shall meet again, I promise.” He could hear the smile in her voice and for some reason he did not fear her – whoever she was. “Remember, you are not alone. Now rest.”

Tony felt a slight warmth on his forehead and the press of what felt like lips for a long moment before both the pressure and the heat disappeared. He blinked once then a second time as he raised a hand to his forehead.

“FRIDAY?”

“Yes, boss?”
He rubbed his forehead as he stared, unseeing, at the mess he’d made. Tony tried to conjure up some type of fear or worry at the thought of some unknown person or thing being able to get to him even inside his penthouse without FRIDAY even being able to detect them, but he couldn’t. No matter how hard he tried he just didn’t feel threatened by this new development.

Whoever they were, he had a feeling they didn’t mean him any harm.

“Nevermind, FRIDAY,” he said as he slowly stood to his feet. He needed to lie down. He’d clean up later. “Let no one in until I wake up. Lock out code, 91149. Anyone ask, tell them I’m fine and don’t want to be disturbed. When Rhodey and Natasha ask, tell them I’ll talk to them later when I wake up.”

“Yes, boss,” replied FRIDAY, quietly. “Sleep well.”

Tony kicked off his shoes and climbed, fully dressed, onto the large bed. Turning on his side, he sighed as he rested his head on his pillow, quickly beginning to drift off. “Thank you,” he breathed and was out so fast he didn’t even notice FRIDAY black out the windows.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

“You should know that I do not plan to continue doing this your way.”

The man behind the desk looked up and took in the young black woman before him as his eyes met her violet gaze. “Excuse me?”

“For thousands of years we have worked from the shadows; never be seen, but always protect,” she said with a shake of her head. “So much more could have been prevented.”

“You know why that is; they get reckless when they know. Think themselves invincible.”

“He already is that,” she muttered under her breath with a huff before speaking up. “I have never liked this, you know that. Some things should not have happened, the cave should not have happened.”

“It was necessary,” he replied as he removed his glasses and sighed. He knew they would eventually revisit this conversation. “He was going to be dead in the next year if he did not make a change fast. His destiny is very bright and he was very close to missing it. And you know we do not interfere with their choices.”

“So the lesson justifies the means?” she asked with an incredulous look.

“It was necessary,” he repeated. “You know that. You may not like it, but you know it. We do NOT interfere with their choices.”

“But.”

“No. We do not interfere with their right to lead their own lives,” he cut in, voice hard and unyielding. “He had many people try to stop him, but he chose to go there anyway. That is not on you and that is not on us. If you feel you cannot hold to that rule now, I will reassign him.”

“No,” she shook her head slightly. “He is mine. I have not interfered with his choices before and will not start to now, but I also will not do this from the shadows any longer.”

“You want to do things your way? Fine; he is your ward as you say,” he nodded as he folded his hands together on his desk. “You are one of our strongest, Kisa, that is why you were chosen for
him. He is destined for great things, but it is not an easy road he walks. That is why he has you. Despite how young you are, you are still one of our best and brightest.”

“I do not like to see him hurting,” she sighed as she looked at her feet. She’d been watching over him since he was a baby and she knew she had grown attached.

“Hurting is a part of life,” he said as he stood and walked towards her. He put a finger under her chin and lifted her gaze back to his. “You have a compassionate heart, Kisa. You have always seen the strength and potential in others where they have not seen it in themselves. Perhaps he will benefit from knowing you are there.”

She gave him a small smile before gently removing his hand from her chin. She squeezed his hand in silent gratitude before letting go.

“Just be sure that this is the path you wish to take. You cannot take it back once you have begun.”

“I know,” she nodded. “But what is coming… I have seen things, elder… I do not think any of us will be able to stay in the shadows for much longer and I, for one, would rather be there now instead of just dropping in on him in the middle of a battle.”

He nodded. He, too, had seen things, visions of things to come. But, he knew, only the past is written in stone; anything else could be changed.

“Go. Do as you need,” he said, nodding towards the door behind her. “Should it become necessary we will be ready.”

Her eyes flicked back and forth between his as she tried to understand what he wasn’t saying. Another silent moment passed between them before she nodded and turned to leave.

He watched her petite form walk away as he pondered what she’d said. She could be right; this new threat was very powerful and it would probably take all of them to help meet it. Especially if The Avengers proved to be unable.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Sam looked around the room, everyone had left except for him and Steve, who was currently sitting on the couch looking like someone just told him his puppy was hit by a car and didn’t make it. He wanted so badly to walk away too; to not have to deal with any of this.

Sometimes it sucked being the good guy.

He sighed and sent another silent prayer to God before moving to sit on the plush seat closest to the corner of the couch Steve was sitting on. There wasn’t enough of his mama’s sweet potato pie for this.

“It’s not easy is it?” he asked quietly, eyes focused on the man beside him. When he finally received a questioning look in return he clarified. “Being you. We – and I don’t mean just the Avengers, but the rest of the world, too – we always expect you to have all the answers on the battle field, that we often expect it off the field, too. We follow you blindly, but you’re the one who gets blamed for it. That’s a huge responsibility to take on.”

“It’s part of the job,” breathed Steve with a shrug, not really seeing where his friend was going with what he was saying.

“No,” he shook his head, “it’s who you are; Steve Rogers. You have such a high moral compass
we know that you’ll do the right thing in any situation even when it’s the hardest thing to do. But
Steve Rogers isn’t perfect; we forget that because of Captain America.”

“Tony doesn’t. He’s always been able to call me on my crap.”

“Maybe you need to spend some time thinking on just why that is,” he said with a nod.

Steve met his gaze then, both sharing a look, but he refused to say anymore on the subject. Some
things a man needed to discover on his own, he knew, and sometimes that couldn’t happen until
one was ready. He didn’t think Steve was ready to face that yet; not with what he’d done to Tony
on top of it.

We always hurt the ones we love, he thought with a shake of his head. He hoped the Captain
would get his head out of his ass soon though, because this situation wasn’t going to get any better
until he did.

“You know, ever since we met with Fury this morning I’ve been trying to figure out where we
started to go wrong with all this avenger stuff and I can’t help thinking it was when we took down
S.H.I.E.L.D with HYDRA,” he began thoughtfully, redirecting the subject. “I think Fury had the
right idea back then when he said we needed to take down Hydra and save S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“What?”

“I mean, think about it,” he continued, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees, “when
Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D were working with you guys things like Sokovia and this ‘civil war’ didn’t
happen,” he made quoting gestures in the air with a roll of his eyes. “I wondered back then why
you were so quick to condemn S.H.I.E.L.D. along with HYDRA; you’d even made a comment to
Fury that the creation of the Winter Soldier and HYDRA’s infiltration was his fault, because of his
secrets, but that’s just not true. Fact is, HYDRA had to have infiltrated long before Fury became
Director and I won’t even bring up the creation of the Winter Soldier, because the man’s just not
old enough; I mean he was born in what, ’50-’51? I read the information dump on the net, too.”

Sam stood and shook his head then, beginning to pace across the room. It was all starting to make
a sick kind of sense. And he’d followed like a lamb to the slaughter. He really had no one to
blame but himself he decided as he ignored Steve’s eyes following his track back and forth across
the room. And really this wasn’t about blame; this was about healing.

“It was about Bucky,” he said turning to Steve and watching him stiffen. “You were feeling guilty
about Bucky and you needed someone else to blame too and there was no way you were going to
blame Peggy Carter. Truth is, though, with Alexander Pierce having succeeded Peggy Carter and
being the one to make Nick Fury director, it had to have happened on her watch. But you knew
that already.”

“Sam,” Steve sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “It’s not what you think. Do you really believe
Nick Fury was completely innocent in all that?”

“Yes it is,” Sam nodded, not giving an inch. Not this time. “And yeah I do, because Pierce was in
a position to make sure he didn’t. Nick Fury went in blind to all of that. He’s ruthless and he may
be willing to sacrifice the few to save the many, but you can’t say his highest priority isn’t the
protection of the human race. Sokovia and New York are a testament to that fact. Despite some of
his questionable actions, I do believe the man is one of the good guys.”

“But-“
“You can’t condemn the man for having secrets when you went and did the same thing,” he cut the
captain off. “And honestly, I think if he knew long ago that Barnes was the Winter Soldier and that
the Winter Soldier had killed Howard and Maria Stark he would have made it his personal mission
to stop Barnes. Probably permanently.”

Steve grimaced, but couldn’t deny the theory. It was no secret that Nick Fury had been good
friends with Peggy Carter and the Starks. Steve sighed. Maybe Sam had a point; bringing down
S.H.I.E.L.D. hadn’t made anything easier and it only provided the world with information it really
didn’t need, like who the Winter Soldier was. What if Fury hadn’t been able to keep Clint’s family
out of any S.H.I.E.L.D. files? He’d have potentially put the family in danger with the release of
the organization’s knowledge. Not to mention dumping a lot of Natasha’s aliases out there… He
could admit that there were things the public just didn’t need to know. It had also caused a lot of
trouble for Peggy’s family since the woman hadn’t been in any shape to answer any questions
herself at the time.

“God, why do you all listen to me?” Steve shook his head in self-disgust.

“Probably because we know you’ll do it with or without us anyway,” Sam answered with a slight
smirk. “You’re not responsible for our choices, Steve. But I am beginning to notice you don’t
really make rational ones when it comes to people important to you... Why didn’t you tell him,
Steve?”

“I-” Steve shook his head as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he placed his
head in his hands. “I don’t know.”

“Yes you do,” replied Sam, sitting back down as he watched Steve. “Stop trying to find some
excuse in your head that you think I’ll agree with and just tell me.”

Steve pressed the heel of his hands into his closed eyes for a long moment before he dropped his
hands, eyes trained on the floor. Why didn’t he tell Tony? Really, there were a lot of reasons, but
if he was honest with himself the biggest one was because he didn’t want Stark to be angry at
Bucky. If there was one person in the world who would have been able to find Bucky before Steve
did, it was most likely Tony. Especially with the help of J.A.R.V.I.S.

And he couldn’t let that happen.

Because it was his fault what happened to Bucky, what HYDRA had turned him into, so he
couldn’t just let Tony kill him. And Tony would have; wasn’t what happened in Siberia proof of
that? If he hadn’t been there and Tony had found Bucky alone… he didn’t even want to imagine it.

He had told himself so many excuses for why not telling Tony was the right choice; it would cause
him unnecessary pain, there wasn’t a need for him to know the truth, he wouldn’t be able to handle
it, and his favorite – Tony wasn’t close to Howard anyway, why would he care? That thought
right there should have been a red flag that maybe he wasn’t thinking straight, but either way he’d
known telling Tony wouldn’t have gone well.

“Steve?”

Steve looked over at Sam then. Would Sam understand? Be able to see his side of things? He
guessed he was about to find out. “I didn’t tell Tony because I didn’t want him to hate Bucky or to
blame him for his parents’ deaths. I also didn’t want to hurt him.”

Sam nodded but eyed him skeptically, a question in his gaze. “Them the only reasons?”
“The most important ones,” he tried to shrug, not wanting to say he was afraid he’d have to choose between his brother and his – and Tony. And he didn’t want to look too deep for why that was. Not yet. “And I was right, too; Tony almost killed Bucky in Siberia.” You’re an idiot, said a voice in his head that sounded remarkably like his old friend.

“Really?” said Sam with an arched brow, silently impressed. He knew from experience that Barnes wasn’t an easy target to take down. At Steve’s nod he tilted his head in thought. “I’m sure the way he found out played a factor in that. You knowing for so long and not telling him on top of everything else that was going on probably didn’t help either.”

“I know all that, but it wasn’t Bucky’s fault.”

Sam eyed Steve as he thought about what he was going to say next. He knew it wasn’t something Steve would want to hear, but as he decided pulling his punches with the captain wasn’t doing either of them any good he chose to speak his mind. “You have to know on some level that’s not true. I get that he’s your friend, your brother, and what happened to him sucks beyond anything, but he was the one to kill the Starks. It wasn’t of his choice, but that doesn’t completely absolve him of the responsibility.”

“It was my fault though,” said Steve with a shake of his head. “I should have caught him on that train… If anyone should be blamed it’s me; I let him fall.”

“You didn’t let him do anything, Steve,” said Sam, firmly. He wasn’t hearing that bullshit. “I don’t have to have been there to know you tried to catch him. Do you think it’s my fault Riley fell?”

“What?” asked Steve, startled. “No, of course not, Sam.”

“Good. So how is my situation any different from yours?” he asked. “I think you’re starting to drink the Kool-Aid, Cap, you seem to think that serum made you perfect, too.” Sam narrowed his eyes at the look of exasperation Steve shot him. “Oh no? Fine. Ask yourself this then, Steve, how did Barnes survive that fall?”

“What?” Steve froze. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s well known that not too long before that mission on the train you’d rescued Barnes from a HYDRA base and you once told me you were sure that they’d been doing something to him, but he’d never told you what,” he shrugged. “It ever occur to you that maybe that’s where it started with him? And that had he’d told you you’d have known to either not let him go on the mission or to go looking for him as it may have been possible he survived? No normal person could have survived that fall. You know that or else you would have gone back, damn what anyone said.”

“So you’re saying this is Bucky’s fault?” he growled, anger rising. “That what they did to him is his fault?!”

“No,” he replied, facing Steve’s anger head on. “What I’m saying is that Barnes made a choice. He probably chose to say nothing knowing that your superiors would want him to get checked out and if that happened he couldn’t have your back on that mission. Whatever his reason he chose to keep quiet and it led to him becoming the Winter Soldier. His choices are not your responsibility and I’m sure he would say the same.”

Steve frowned and looked away from him; not liking what he was saying. It also sounded awfully like something Bucky would do and that made him even angrier and he couldn’t just out right deny Sam’s words because of that. Knowing how dangerous that mission was going to be – and had
proven to be – there was no way Bucky would have done something that would have got him grounded or even sent home, leaving Steve to go without him.

Bucky would have never risked that.

“Want to know what I think?” Sam waited for him to look back at him. “I think you didn’t tell Tony because you didn’t want to be put between the two, to have to choose. Without the Accords and the need to protect Barnes in the way, I bet even right now you have no idea who you would have chosen if asked. That being said, you still should have told him. They were his parents and it wasn’t your choice to make. He had a right to know the truth and he should have heard it from someone who cares about him.”

“I know.”

“I’m not sure you do,” Sam replied, shaking his head and standing up. “Right now you seemed to be more upset about how he found out and what happened after than about your part in him not knowing.” He crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at Steve. “Tell me, if you had it to do all over again would you change anything? Because, right now, I don’t believe you would.”

They stared at each other for a moment before Sam sighed and turned towards the door. Steve was unable to reply because he was worried he’d only prove Sam right. Did he view this whole thing as a choice between Bucky and Tony?

“You should probably figure that out soon,” said Sam as he turned and started to walk away, causing Steve to slightly flinch, thinking the other man had read his mind. “And probably ask yourself why you’d rather Tony be angry at you than see him hurt, because that’s not how it’s supposed to be.”

How what supposed to be, wonder Steve with a confused look at his friend’s back as he was walking away. Loving someone, you dork. Again, that voice that sounded just like his best friend was in his head.

Sam stopped at the door to look back at his silent friend, deciding to add one last thing. “You should note that you say you didn’t tell him because you didn’t want to hurt him nor for him to hate and blame Barnes, but that’s exactly what did happen. All of it. And if you were trying to not choose between them, it’s what you ended up doing anyway. You procrastinated and the choice was made for you… and it wasn’t Tony, in case you didn’t notice.”

Steve froze as he stared at his friend with unseeing eyes. He was so deep in his head he didn’t even see or hear Sam bid him goodbye as he left him alone in the common room.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA

Natasha stood alone in the Pool room, staring down at the waters’ surface as her reflection stared back at her. She wanted so much to blame the hurt she saw on Tony’s face on Steve, but she couldn’t deny her part in it.

She’d been sure she was making the right choice to leave telling Tony to Steve. Even Fury hadn’t bothered to tell the engineer.

She heard the unmistakable tap-step of Rhodes approaching and wasn’t surprised when his reflection showed alongside her own not too long after.

“I was going to have a swim,” she said after the silence grew too long between them.
“I can see that,” he nodded, eyeing her black one piece from the corner of his eyes.

“Were you looking for me?”

“Not really,” he shrugged. “Just wandering around. Went to the penthouse, but Tony has it on lock down and has blocked all overrides.” She looked at him then. “Don’t worry; FRIDAY says he’s fine, just sleeping. He said he’ll talk to us later.”

She nodded turning back towards the water. If FRIDAY said Tony was alright she wouldn’t worry. The A.I. would let them know if there was a reason to be concerned and she wouldn’t keep them out if Tony was in danger no matter what the idiot told her to do.

“I was talking to Steve yesterday, trying to convey to him some of what Tony and the rest of us have been through while he and the others were hiding in Wakanda. I had told him about how Tony stood before the world and the UN telling them how Barnes shouldn’t be held accountable for his actions as the Winter Soldier even with the footage of him killing his parents playing everywhere,” she frowned, back stiff. “I was trying to tell him how hard that had to be and I didn’t even know the half of it.”

“Steve did.”

“Steve did,” she gave a slight nod.

“Then you did what you were trying to do,” he told her gently. “You may not have known just what you were telling Steve, but he knew. He understood what you couldn’t have known, so your point still got across.”

“I should have known.”

He didn’t need to ask her what she meant. “How? I’m pretty sure Tony didn’t even like you that much back then and seeing what you said about him in your report to S.H.I.E.L.D. I’d say the feeling was mutual.”

That was true, but even back then she could tell there was more to Tony Stark than what he showed the world. She just didn’t feel like looking any deeper than she initially had. Natasha should have guessed that if a woman like Pepper was willing to stay by the man’s side, despite everything, that there was something there worth looking for.

“I am friends with Steve though and worked closely with him, seeing as I was with him when he learned the truth,” she said with a contemplative look. “After it all happened I should have noticed that there were never any sad-puppy-Steve moments. I had to lay low at the time, but I was never that far away. I would have noticed an upset Cap; the rain clouds blocking out the sun would have been a dead give-away.”

Rhodey shrugged and smirked at the visual. That was true. Steve Rogers was a champion pouter, if ever he saw one.

She gave him a knowing look before handing him her towel then stepped forward, diving smoothly into the water. Rhodes watched quietly as she swam across the Olympic size pool, expertly turning when reaching the other end and heading back towards him. She did this three more times before coming to stop in front of him and levering herself up on the edge of the pool.

He arched a brow as he looked down at her, figuring she had something to say.

“Why does Tony have a pool in the tower yet I’ve never seen him use it?”
Rhodey blinked. That wasn’t what he was expecting… “Tony doesn’t swim. Not since Afghanistan.”

Natasha stared at him for a moment then nodded. That hadn’t been the reason she’d expected to hear, but she guessed it made sense in a sad way. Tony wasn’t the type of person who’d easily accept having a fear, especially over something he would consider should hold no power over him. Having a pool built inside his home was his way of giving the universe the middle finger and she had no doubt that one day he will force himself to actually use it.

“Rhodes, what do you know about the vision Wanda gave Tony?”

Bruce sighed as he stared out at the view from the roof of the tower. It had grown pretty late and the night sky lay like a dark blanket across the city. From up there he could almost make out the stars way above the city lights. New York City was still a city that never slept.

He was almost tempted to leave again.

After the scene from earlier, he was more positive than ever before that things were much worse than he’d imagined. It was almost as if the last few years didn’t happen; they were acting almost like strangers. If not for the change in the relationship between Natasha and Tony he’d think he’d stepped through a time portal or something.

The trust between them all was almost non-existent. Bruce knew that the whole ordeal was going to test his nerves – and the Hulk’s – but he knew he couldn’t leave now. Tony needed him to stick around or his friend would have never suggested to Natasha that she find him. Not to mention, whatever it was that brought Thor back. He was certain that whatever it was it wasn’t good; Thor has never come to Earth with good news.

And then there was Natasha.

She was the one who was on his mind the most. They had made plans before his impromptu departure and while he still believed that how things turned out were actually for the best – them running away would have never lasted – he also knew how he left was wrong even if it was the right choice for him at the time. Bruce had needed the time to come to terms with his own part in the making of Ultron, which had resulted in the complete destruction of Sokovia and he couldn’t do that there, surrounded by the rest of them. And it wasn’t helping him that they were all, including Thor, blaming Tony for it all and completely ignoring Bruce’s part in it. Even Tony had been placing all the blame on himself simply because it was his idea, but Tony did not force Bruce to help him. That had been his decision, but with what he did in Johannesburg on top of everything else, he just needed some space from it all to get his head back right and to be sure that being an Avenger was really the right path for him.

Despite all that, Bruce knew he owed Natasha an explanation, but he also knew she would never ask him for it.

Bruce had been avoiding the conversation mostly because he wasn’t ready to face her uninterest. He was well aware he’d waited too long to come back and though that was not by choice it was what happened. He wasn’t sure if Natasha had moved on with someone else as she’d never been the easiest person to read – you knew what she wanted you to know, that’s it – but he was certain she’d moved on. She had to have. What woman in their right mind would wait around for a man they weren’t even sure they’d ever see again? It just wasn’t done.
Problem was, he did. Most nights the only thing that had gotten Bruce through was his thoughts of Natasha. He’d held on to her and how he felt for her through his entire time away. And now that he was truly ready to really try and make something with her she wanted nothing to do with him. At least not like that.

Whatever their fate, he knew a conversation with her was long overdue and he figured now was as good a time as any. He gave the beautiful New York skyline one more look before he turned and went back inside. As he made his way steadily down the stairs he wondered where Natasha would be at this time. It was after eight, but none of them had ever been good at sleeping on a schedule, except for maybe Thor. He figured he’d start with the common floor and if she wasn’t there maybe someone else was and had seen her if she hadn’t retired already.

Entering the common floor he saw the lights were down and figured no one was there as he headed for the living room and kitchen area, but stopped when he came across a silent Thor standing alone and staring out of the large windows.

“Thor?” he called out in concern. “Is everything alright?”

Thor sighed heavily and shook his head, “Everything is not alright, Dr. Banner.” He turned around then to face the other man. “And I fear things will only get much worse and I hesitate to speak of this matter to our friends for the Avengers are no longer as I left them, but I do not know of where else to turn for I believe your S.H.I.E.L.D is no more. I must speak with friend Tony; Midgard will not be spared. Do you know where I can find him? I have been waiting here for his return, but so far he has not.”

“It sounds serious…” said Bruce thoughtfully.

“That it is, my friend.”

“Have you asked FRIDAY?”

“I have not,” replied Thor with a negative shake of his head. He’d thought of asking friend Tony’s computer for aide, but he still found the disembodied voice a bit disconcerting.

Bruce gave the god a curious look as he waited, but when the god continued to remain quiet he figured the task was being left to him. He idly wondered why FRIDAY didn’t just offer up the information, but he figured the A.I had her reasons.

“FRIDAY, could you tell me where Tony is?” called out Bruce as he raised his head slightly, not quite looking at the ceiling, but lifting his gaze up higher.

“Hello Dr. Banner,” spoke FRIDAY almost immediately. “Boss has asked that he not be disturbed, but he also did state that he would like to catch up with both you and Mr. Odinson later. One can say that now can be construed as the ‘later’ from his statement. Boss is currently in his workshop.”

Bruce gave a slight grin. “I take it he’s not busy?”

“That would depend on one’s own definition of ‘busy’, Dr. Banner.”

Bruce fully grinned this time. Was that sass he heard? Tony truly was a genius when it came to computers. To make not one, but two remarkable A.I.s with very different and distinct personalities… it was truly amazing.

“Well, to the workshop we go then,” said Bruce to Thor as he turned to head for the elevator.
“Thank you, FRIDAY.”

“Of course, Dr. Banner.”

“I have never been to his shop of work,” said Thor as he followed Bruce on to the elevator. “Is it as wondrous as the Captain has said?”

“I think I’ll let you decide for yourself,” smiled Bruce as the elevator began to descend.

*********

“See, I told you this is where he would be,” said Rhodey to Natasha as they both watched the engineer through the glass. Their subject was still unaware of their presence as he jumped around bopping his head to the music they were both thankful they couldn’t hear through the glass.

Natasha tilted her head as she observed Tony. They’d been standing there outside the worklab for over three minutes and she was still unsure as to what he thought he was doing. “What is he doing?”

“That, my young Padawan, is what many of the people call ‘dancing’,” he said with an arched brow. “It has a rather strange showing, but many have embraced it regardless.”

Natasha eyed him from the corner of her eyes before she looked back into the lab. She watched Tony jump around like a kid on a sugar high for a moment longer before replying, “That is not dancing.”

Rhodey grinned but didn’t comment. Of course, he was in complete agreement, but how else does one move to the abominations Tony liked to call music?

They both looked behind them at the sound of the elevator opening and were surprised to see Thor step out of the elevator beside Bruce.

“Lt. Colonel Rhodes, Natasha,” nodded Bruce in greeting. It seemed he would not have to put off his conversation after all, he thought for a moment before he looked behind them and into the lab.

He blinked and slowly lifted his brows.

Thor, too, was staring through the glass after giving the unexpected two a nod in greeting. “Is he having a seizure?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Rhodey and Natasha both answered in unison. Rhodey side-eyed Natasha, but her face remained completely straight in return as she kept her gaze on Thor. It always took him off guard when signs of her sense of humor slipped out.

“No,” repeated Rhodey to the god as he turned back to look at his friend. “He’s… well a seizure is a better description, but he’s not in any danger.”

“Unless he trips and breaks his billionaire neck,” added Bruce, placing his hands in his pockets as he stepped up next to Natasha.

“Can you imagine the headlines?” said Rhodey with a smirk. “’Here lies Anthony Edward Stark; genius, billionaire, philanthropist, playboy and….unfortunate dancer. He waged a battle with the
floor and the floor won.””

“That’s not dancing,” stated Thor with authority.

They all nodded in agreement.

“Now I understand why FRIDAY said he wasn’t busy.”

“Did she?” asked Natasha and continued after he nodded. “It was probably more to do with the music he’s playing than the fact he appears to be doing nothing.”

“She really doesn’t care for his taste in music,” nodded Rhodey. “At least not the rock metal stuff.”

“I imagine she’s hoping we’ll interrupt him so he will have to turn that noise off,” agreed Natasha.

“Well, let’s not keep the lady waiting any longer,” said Rhodey moving forward to enter his code in the door. “I think we can all agree that a happy FRIDAY is much better for us all.”

“Aye, it does appear to be a common theme with the ladies I have come to know well,” agreed Thor.

Natasha eyed the blonde, but did not comment. She figured they could revisit the issue next time they had a sparring session… and maybe she’d give Jane a call; it’s been a while since they last chatted.

“You can stop the music, FRIDAY,” called out Rhodey as he and the rest entered the work-lab. They watched silently as Tony, still with his back to them, came to an immediate stop and actually looked up when the place went suddenly quiet.

“FRIDAY?” asked Tony, confused. “What are you doing? I was just getting into that one. My juices were flowing…” Suddenly Dum-E came whirling pass him, hand waving side to side and thumb in the air. “I will donate you to a high school, you watch. Not a University, a high school. Black Sabbath deserves all the respect.”

“Your ‘juices were flowing’?”

“You have guests, boss. I saw no reason to offend them.”

“Honey-bear!” exclaimed Tony as he spun around, recognizing the voice instantly. “And company. The sass, did you hear the sass? She gets that from JARVIS.”

“As you say, boss.”

“See? All JARVIS,” he grinned, unashamedly proud. “Did I mention she also shares JARVIS’s non-ability to know good music? So what brings you all by? Thor, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you down here before, good to see you getting around more. Nat, I see you’re making use of the pool; glad someone is and Brucie-bear! Have you come for our catching up? Because man, do I have a story to tell you. We can start from the beginning, won’t take long at all.”

“Still not that kind of doctor, Tony,” replied Bruce, trying to hide a grin. Some things would never change. Strangely, he found the thought comforting.

Natasha arched a brow as she noted the word vomit. She figured them all just showing up on him was making him wary of their motives.
“Aye, my friend,” smiled Thor as he observed the engineer, silently noting Tony’s unease. “Unfortunately I have not come only to see your lab of work. I have need of your assistance if you would grant it to me.”

Tony blinked at the large blonde, surprised; that had not been what he was expecting. “Of course, Thor, you know that. Anything I can help you with,” he replied. He had to admit, the god had him curious.

“Tony,” said Rhodey, stealing his friend’s attention from the blonde. “Natasha asked me an interesting question earlier and I find I’m also curious,” he continued as he watched Tony’s eyes flick between him and Natasha. “When did Wanda give you a vision and what did you see?”

Tony blinked. That he was definitely not expecting. “Heard about that did you?” He moved over to one of his work tables, picking up and studying the defective repulsor he’d recently removed and replaced in the Mark XLVII; his latest armor. He missed the sharp look both Bruce and Thor aimed his way in the silence as he contemplated what or if he should tell them.

After a few more moments of silence passed, he gave a mental shrug and nodded as he tossed the broken tech back on the table. Fuck it, he thought as he eyed them. He figured it was no harm in them knowing now; the consequences of it were passed now anyway.

“I think it was a vision of the future or possible one, I guess,” he began with a shrug. “Maximoff wasn’t really forthcoming on the specifics and she’d done what she’d set out to do anyway, I figure. I saw you all dead from some battle, the Earth destroyed and me the only one left.”

“When was this?” asked Thor in confusion, crossing his arms over his chest. “I do not recall the young Maximoff girl employing her powers against you when both I and the Lady Natasha were afflicted. If I recall correctly, you went to retrieve our Hulk, who had also been afflicted by young Maximoff.”

“No, you’re right, it wasn’t then,” he nodded, rubbing his fingers over his lips in a nervous habit he’d yet to kick. Tony knew once he answered they’d put it all together, especially Bruce and Nat, and he wasn’t sure he wanted that. “It was before that. At the Sokovian base where we retrieved the scepter and Von Strucker. She came up on me from behind.”

“And then you suddenly had the idea to study the scepter… eventually us creating Ultron,” breathed out Bruce, a dawning horror crossing his face. “Did she know what would happen? Did she know we would create Ultron and endanger everyone?”

“You mean me,” he corrected and shook his head. “And I don’t think so. Why would she and her brother help us stop him in the end? But I’m sure she knew the power the scepter held though and what she was hoping it would do to me.” He shrugged then. “It worked.”

“Then it is she who is responsible for the creation of Ultron,” declared Thor. “I am sorry, my friend. I judged you harshly back then.”

“No,” said Tony, shaking his head. “You were right; I created Ultron and I was the one who put us and the Earth in danger. A great man once said that ‘we create our own demons’ right? She’s not responsible for my actions, only I am.”

“Actually she is,” said Natasha, watching him. He was always so quick to take all the blame for bad things happening. She understood his need to take responsibility for his actions, but he needed to let others do the same. He wasn’t God. “At least partly, she is responsible. Wanda played around in your head and then stood back and watched as others had to face the consequences. She
did the same thing to Bruce and the Hulk and Johannesburg paid the price. It’s not right. She is responsible when she messes around with powerful minds, uncaring of what those minds are capable of and will do as an effect. We all know how much she hated you back then. Wanda is just as much responsible for Ultron as you and Bruce.”

“She is right, my friend,” agreed Thor with a sigh as he dropped his arms to his sides. “The witch holds too much power for her not to be held responsible for them. Is that not the point of your Accords? Does the Captain know of this?”

Tony paused and stared at Thor then; he hadn’t thought of it like that.

“And you let Cap make her an Avenger after that?” asked Rhodey, incredulous and not really looking for an answer. “You let me work with her? Someone who hated you?”

“Rhodey, come on, I didn’t let him do anything. That was Cap’s decision; I was no longer an Avenger.” Tony rolled his eyes. “And what are you complaining for? You’ve worked with plenty of people who hate me; that’s not new.”

Rhodey blinked and froze. After a moment he nodded, “Okay, that’s true.”

Tony frowned. He couldn’t have thought about it a little more?

“Steve needs to know, Tony,” said Natasha. “I’d have never agreed to her working with us if I knew that. And she never said a word… She even actively tried to turn Steve against you.”

Tony looked at her curiously then, but didn’t ask. “Then tell him if you want. I don’t see why it matters now anyway,” he shrugged. “Ultron is gone and she’s already an Avenger, such as it is.”

“Of course it matters; she needs to be held accountable.”

“The Captain is always shielding her. Lagos wouldn’t…”

“Power like her’s needs discipline…”

“I don’t care; just keep her away from me.”

They all began to talk at him at once; each of them with their own thoughts on the matter and all visibly upset, but it was FRIDAY’s voice that got through to him first.

“Boss, there is a call on the line for you from Wakanda.”

“What is this? Bother-Tony-Stark-day? Next Pepper is going to walk through the door…” he muttered as the rest of them slowly quieted. “Who is it, FRIDAY?” he asked, though he was sure he knew already. Who else would be calling him from Wakanda?

“It is King T’challa, boss.”

Tony nodded and turned around. “Put it up on the holo-screen.” Tony waited silently as the screen was brought up and the king’s face appeared in front of them. He could sense the others move in closer behind him. “Your majesty, what can I do you for?” he greeted with a big smile.

Rhodey, Natasha and Bruce recognized Tony’s public mask immediately and instantly went on guard themselves.

“Hello Tony,” smiled the king, genuinely. “That is a very odd turn of phrase and I suspect you employ it knowingly. Can I not call a friend just to see how he is doing?”
“You can,” Tony nodded, both of them aware that he knew that wasn’t the case now.

“Alright my friend,” nodded T’challa with a small smile. “My scientists have informed me that there is nothing more they can do for Mr. Barnes. They have been able to successfully plant a series of neuro blockers in his brain that will block the devices placed by HYDRA to control him and activate the Winter Soldier. It has been tested and all seems to be working nicely. We are, unfortunately, unable to remove those devices placed by HYDRA for fear of causing the man permanent brain damage.”

“Okay,” nodded Tony. So far he’d heard nothing that warranted a phone call to him. This sounded more like a call for Steve, so he assumed there was more the king had to say.

“The doctors would like to bring him out of cryo, feeling that perhaps the key in helping him now is more psychological than physical. They believe that Barnes needs to better remember who he was so he can come to terms with who he is now.”

“And they believe this… therapy will help him get back to that man?”

“Oh no; no, he will never again be the man he was. Too much has happened and been done for that to be achieved, but with help he can possibly get a bit of who he was back and, maybe, one day be something of them both.”

“I see,” replied Tony thoughtfully, pretty sure he knew where this was going now. “And what is it you need from me? I’m sure you didn’t call me just to give me an update on Barnes.”

“No, I did not,” T’challa agreed then straightened in his seat, meeting Tony’s gaze head on. “I have been informed that you have created a machine that can help with this. A machine that helps recall one’s memories?”

“B.A.R.F.”

“No, B.A.R.F.” explained Tony, on auto. He was still trying to decide in his head if he’d heard the king right. He wanted Tony to help Barnes? “Binarily Augmented Retro Framing; I know I need to change it, but it seemed good at the time. It’s not really meant for, you know, good memories, but I guess I could tweak the programing or make a new one. When were you thinking of doing this?”

Tony swallowed. He could practically feel the others’ eyes boring into the back of his head and he knew if he turned to look he’d be met with multiple looks of concern. He was concerned enough on his own though, so he refused to turn. He just hoped they would all remain quiet until he could get the king off the phone.

Apparently the king also noticed the looks his friends were giving him, he guessed, as he saw T’challa’s eyes focus on something behind him before returning to him. “That depends. Do you wish to send the equipment to me or shall I bring Mr. Barnes to you? We would like to begin this as soon as possible, but I will submit to your decision on the matter.”

Tony looked away from the screen then. He didn’t want this. He didn’t want this at all, but he knew there was really only one choice there. None of T’challa’s people were trained to use B.A.R.F. and he did not have the time to train them himself. It would be easier all around if he was the one to do it. Tony knew that… but he still didn’t want to.

“You can bring him here,” he swallowed as he looked back at the screen, mask firmly in place.
“When should I expect you?”

T’challa observed the billionaire quietly for a moment, seeing the other man’s struggle though he was certain he wasn’t supposed to. “I can be there in a week - week and a half, tops.”

“I thought you wanted to get started right away?”

“I am a king, Tony, with a country to run. I cannot go gallivanting off at the drop of a hat, as you say. Things must be put in place of my absence first.”

Tony was sure the king already had such things in place before he’d made the call to him, but he wasn’t going to deny the gift of time. Obviously, even the king could see he needed it. “Alright. I’ll expect you the Monday after next. You should probably also let the Captain know. I’m sure he’d like to know Barnes will be coming.”

T’challa nodded solemnly. He wanted to ask his friend how he was doing, but he knew now was not a good time with the others in the room. “I will. Good day, my friend. I will let you go as I know it is late where you are. And good day to you all as well,” he looked at the five standing behind Tony. “I hope to meet you two that I do not know properly when I arrive. And Tony,” he met the engineer’s eyes again then lowers his head in a small bow of respect. “Thank you. Your nobility will not be forgotten.”

Tony frowned. He wasn’t feeling very noble at all, he thought as he nodded. “I’ll see you then, T’challa.”

Tony waited for the screen to go black and disappear before turning around to face the others. He blinked in surprise to see Vision was now among them, standing tall behind Natasha. He stood quietly as he accepted the concerned looks and the severe frown marring Rhodey’s face.

“Was that wise?” asked Vision into the silence.

“What? We have the room,” replied Tony, deliberately misunderstanding. What other choice did he have? “And even if we don’t, I’m sure Cap will let Barnes have his guestroom. He’d probably even prefer that.”

“Tony,” said Natasha, crossing her arms now.

“What?” he asked as he looked at her. They stared at one another silently; neither backing down until Natasha slowly raised a brow. “Fine,” he sighed dropping his mask and shoulders slumping. “But what other choice was there? I couldn’t very well tell him ‘no’, could I?”

“Why does it always have to be you though?” asked Rhodey, completely upset and not liking the situation at all.

“Who else is there? B.A.R.F. is still pretty new and I don’t have the time to train his people to use it correctly on top of having to make the programming changes necessary for it to work as T’challa needs.”

Rhodey sighed and frowned, not having an answer for all that.

“Fine,” spoke Bruce into the issuing silence, “But you can show Vision and I how to work this machine of yours, so you don’t have to do this alone.”

“I can-”
“I’m not saying you can’t,” Bruce quickly cut him off, knowing exactly what Tony was going to say and not wanting to hear it. “That doesn’t mean you have to, though. We’re helping you with this, Tony. That’s it.”

Rhodey was, of course, nodding in agreement.

Tony gave up then. Truthfully, he was thankful they were wanting to help him with this, because he wasn’t at all sure he could do it on his own. “Fine.”

“Good,” smiled Bruce, “Because it wasn’t a request.”

Tony rolled his eyes at that, but grinned at his friend. He was glad to have the doctor back, he had to admit. It was going to be fun working with him, again.

“Alright Thor,” he said, looking at the god. “You mentioned before you needed my help with something. Everyone is putting in their requests, so I think now’s the time you should, too.”

Thor regarded him silently. He wasn’t sure he understood what had just happened, but he thought he had the way of it if this Barnes person was whom he thought he was. And if he was correct, then his friend had a greater sense of compassion than anyone else he knew on Midgard for, to Thor, Tony would have been well within his right to refuse the request of assistance.

“I do request your assistance, my friend; for you are the only one I could think of who could help me in a timely manner.”

“And I told you, you have it,” said Tony as he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the table behind him. “What is it you need, Big Guy?”

“My father, King Odin, has gone missing somewhere on Midgard. I need your help in finding him and time is of the essence.”
Chapter IV

Chapter: IV

Tony was at a loss. He didn’t think he’d ever felt this way before…. For the first time in his life Tony was truly speechless. He’d had moments where he didn’t know what to say, while still having plenty to say and he’s had moments where he knew what to say, but didn’t have the words to say it. But never in his life has his mind gone completely blank on him, even if it was just for a moment.

He blinked.

“…What?”

There’s no way Thor had said what he just heard. He must have been hallucinating. Yeah, because what? There was just no way… Who kidnaps a God-king? How? How was that even possible? And it had to be kidnapping or godnapping, right? Because it would be awful – and a little hilarious – if the king was just, you know, lost, but Thor wouldn’t need help with just lost and –

“What?” he repeated seconds later, still staring wide-eyed at Thor.

Thor shifted his gaze around at everyone, confused, and noting they all had similar looks on their face as friend Tony. He did not understand; had he been unclear? He tilted his head in thought as he looked back at the engineer.

“I said my father has gone missing-”

Tony held up a hand, cutting him off. Okay, so he heard that right. “Okay, you did say that. Right. So I’m going to assume when you say “missing” you mean “taken”, because I can’t imagine you’d need help finding your father, the god-king, the All Father, yeah, if he was just simply lost. Like a tourist kind of lost. So who takes a god-king and how?”

Thor blinked, stared for a moment then suddenly grinned. It was truly a marvel watching this man’s mind at work. It reminded him of his Jane when Tony had his ‘word-vomit moments’, as his Jane liked to call them when she did the same.

“Loki-”

Again, Tony cut him off with a raised hand. “Okay, right, say no more. I should have thought of that.” He ignored everyone else’s nods as he thought for a moment. “Okay, I need a few details, so questions first. I imagine the reason for all this has something to do with why you’re back. I remember the reason you left and I can only assume you found the information you were looking for, but you probably want to wait to tell us all together, probably with S.H.I.E.L.D in attendance, so we’ll leave that alone for now and you can tell me why you think your father is here and for how long has he been missing?”

Thor frowned at being interrupted a second time, but did not take offense. It was annoying, but unfortunately true, that Loki was the obvious suspect for something like this. And he wasn’t at all surprised that Tony had already figured out he’d come with news; the man was very observant though he hid it well.

“Heimdall was able to receive only a moment’s glimpse of my father before he was hidden from
him once more. That is how we were able to discover Loki’s treachery, but he fled before I could get my hands on him,” he frowned, frustration radiating from his every pore. Thor crossed his arms as he thought for a moment. “I am uncertain of the exact length of time, but my assumption is he has been missing since Loki faked his death just prior to my battle with the elves in your city of England. As I have seen him with my own eyes, I know now Loki did not die helping me. It was another of his tricks and Loki is nothing if not thorough in his plans, so I can only assume this has been going on from the very moment he died in my arms.”

“Country,” Tony automatically corrected as he thought about what he just said.

“That was in Greenwich,” said Natasha thoughtfully. “I remember the news coverage and S.H.I.E.L.D had been called in for it, though I wasn’t sent on that mission. That was over four years ago.”

“That’s a long time for a King to be missing and no one notice,” said Bruce, thoughtfully. “How is that possible?”

“Loki impersonated the king and has been sitting on the throne,” Thor replied, face hard as stone. His anger was strong and it was taking all his will not to show it more aggressively.

Everyone exchanged uneasy looks as they heard a loud clap of thunder strike across the sky outside. It had to have been very hard for them to have heard it down in Tony’s lab.

“Okay, Big Guy, I know you’re angry, but you need to calm down before your lightning destroys something,” said Tony, waving his hands up and down in the air. “We’ll find him.”

Thor gave a nod, grateful for both their concern and assistance. He knew he was right to come here. “My anger is only matched by my guilt. I should have seen his treachery for what it was, but there is no denying Loki knows father just as well as I. He fooled us all.”

“This would mean Loki had to not only take your father without anyone else seeing and raising an alarm, but also without Heimdall seeing and then continuing to hide it as he hid himself while he impersonated the king,” began Rhodey as he crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t know about you guys, but that sounds like an awful lot to me. I won’t claim to know a lot about Norse mythology, but what I do remember is there aren’t many things that can hide from Heimdall. Am I right?” he turned his gaze to Thor then.

“Aye, that is correct,” nodded Thor. He was not greatly familiar with this friend of Tony, but he could see why the man held a special place in Tony’s heart; he was very loyal. He was willing to help Thor not because he was a fellow Avenger, but because Thor was a friend to Tony. “It would require great power to hide from Heimdall’s sight and to do so for any length of time.”

“That’s what I thought,” Rhodey nodded. “Loki didn’t strike me as having such power; not the way you guys stomped him in New York. So we can assume he’s got some major power helping him, but if Heimdall got a glimpse of the king – I imagine it happened while Loki was getting away from Thor – than we can assume it takes some concentration to do whatever he’s doing to hide himself and the king.” He turned to look at Tony then. “But I bet he’s not thinking to hide from someone else.”

Tony sighed, knowing exactly who Rhodey was talking about. He really really hated magic.

“You think he’d help?”

“If you asked him? Yeah.”
Tony shook his head. He really hated magic. “Fine,” he sighed and looked at the big blonde. “Thor, buddy, be glad I like you.”

“I like you as well, friend Tony,” smiled Thor, completely uncertain as to what was going on. And from his quick glance at everyone else, he could see he wasn’t the only one.

Tony shook his head, but gave the blonde a genuine grin. “Alright. We all know the best way to hide something is to hide it in plain sight. If it doesn’t look like it’s hidden than often no one will notice it is. Only problem is Loki has an entire planet to hide the king on.”

“No,” said Natasha, shaking her head. “Loki is a game player, a trickster at heart. He’d know Thor would come to us for help, so I’d put money on him and the King being in the United States at the very least. And most likely on the east coast. I’m pretty sure when we find him he’s going to be right under our noses.”

“Good point,” nodded Tony before he looked up. “Friday, do a search in every hospital and mental facility across the eastern seaboard, but only state side, for any unknown patients who have been estimated fifty years of age and up that have been admitted in the last four years. Also check for any patients labeled unconscious or in a coma.”

“On it, boss,” said FRIDAY immediately. “There are approximately 326 facilities with the funding and capability of housing an unknown patient for an indefinite amount of time. I have also begun a search of all police data in the specified area for any John Does’ in the same age group that may have been found.”

“Good,” nodded Tony. “How long?”

“Approximately eight hours and twenty eight minutes, boss.”

“Okay, let me know as soon as you have it. I don’t care what I’m doing.”

“Of course,” agreed FRIDAY.

Tony looked back at Thor and nodded. “While she’s doing that I think I know someone who can help us not only narrow that list down, but probably even find your father faster. I’ll contact him in the morning.”

“You think the king may be in a mental hospital, Tony?” asked Bruce, curiously.

Tony shrugged. “I think it’s a possibility if he’s awake and was trying to tell anyone who would listen who he is.”

Bruce nodded, quickly seeing his point. A man claiming to be the ruler of Asgard would not be easily believed, if believed at all and most hospitals would have such a person, at least, moved to their psych ward as long as he was physically okay.

“Aye, you humans do tend to not believe what you consider mythological. It is understandable as you have been isolated for a great many years.”

Tony, Natasha and Rhodey all gave him curious looks then, but neither of them said anything even as they exchanged identical looks with each other.

“It is a plausible conclusion,” said Vision, a thoughtful frown marring his face. “Humans have a great capacity to believe many things, but there are also a great many who believe nothing due to their own unfortunate experiences. Isolation breeds loneliness. It is difficult to believe in others
when one believes themselves to have always been alone.”

Tony swallowed and looked away from him then. Why did he have to continue to sound like Jarvis? He folded his arms across his chest, absentmly tapping his fingers on his scar as he tried to pull everything back in. He felt both Natasha and Rhodey close in on him, but didn’t look at either of them. He just needed another minute.

“I can’t say I believed in much, either, as a child,” began Natasha, taking the other’s attention away from Tony even as she gently pressed her shoulder into his side. “And I can’t really say what I believe now, but I do believe in something I’m just not sure what that something is or how much it gives a damn about us. Even now, when I look at Thor I think “alien” before I think “god” and I’m sure there are others who think the same.”

Bruce and Rhodey both nodded.

“I’m Christian, so I’ve always believed in the Lord,” said Rhodey before he knocked his fist against the metal of one of his leg braces. “My faith is what gets me through a lot of things and keeps me going when I want to give up. I’ve also witnessed many miracles; my best friend is one. So while I may have a hard time believing in any other God I do believe in my friends and family and I do believe you’re, at least, godlike.”

“So, mental hospital is possible,” said Tony, rejoining the conversation. He gave Rhodey and Natasha reassuring looks. He was grateful to them both. “How about we pick this back up tomorrow? Fry will have a list for me by then and with some help we should have your father here by tomorrow night.”

Thor smiled broadly at them all as they all nodded in agreement with Tony. He was happy and not just a little surprised that finding his father could happen so fast. “I am thankful to you all and eternally in your debt. Father must return to Asgard and his throne soon before any of the other realms notice his absence. There will surely be war if that happens and we do not have time for that on top of other things.”

“You’re one of us, Thor,” Tony nodded while waving his hand at Thor in an attempt to wave off his gratitude. “I’ll get Fury here after this is finished so you can tell us all what’s going on, though I’m sure I don’t want to know. You never come with good news.”

Everyone agreed to regroup the next day around eleven, giving Tony plenty of time to also contact whoever he and Rhodey had in mind to contact and then they would go from there. They agreed to meet back at the lab before they all filed out, heading for their beds, except for Thor who stayed back and, therefore, keeping Tony there as well.

Tony looked at Thor and waited, guessing the god had something more to say.

“You do not know what this means to me. Without Heimdall’s sight I would not have even known my father is here on Midgard. Loki could have put him anywhere in the Nine Realms,” he shook his head and dropped his arms. “I also worry that Loki may have done something to him to be able to keep him away for so long.”

Tony knew what it was like to worry for a loved one who’d been taken from you. He still felt guilty over Pepper when she’d been taken by Killian. He remembered how desperate and powerless he’d felt when he couldn’t find her.

“We’ll find him, Thor. I promise. If he’s here, FRIDAY will find him.”
“Certainly,” chimed in FRIDAY.

Thor nodded and placed a large hand on Tony’s shoulder. His eyes widened fractionally at the mark that glowed bright on Tony’s forehead before slowly fading out.

Tony, seeing the surprised look on Thor’s face, tilted his head in question. “You okay there, Thundarr?”

“I had no idea you are a Ward, Tony Stark,” he smiled. “You have the mark.”

“What?”

Thor threw his head back and laughed; a booming sound, loud and full of mirth. It was obvious Tony had no idea what he was talking about, but he figured his friend would find out soon. The mark only glowed so bright when it’s creator was very near.

“You will understand soon,” said Thor as he turned to leave. He stopped at the door just before exiting and turned to look back at Tony. “Though, my friend, have you thought of creating your computer an image to accompany her voice? Could it not be done?”

“It could,” nodded Tony, curious of the topic change. He had noticed Thor never spoke to FRIDAY nor JARVIS when he was running the tower. He’d always wondered why that was, but now he had an idea considering Thor seemed to have no issue talking to Vision. “Any particular reason why I should?”

“Would not a form be of service?” he asked in reply, not about to admit to his discomfort with the disembodied lady of the tower. He gave Tony one last look and nodded before making his way to the elevator and leaving.

Silence reigned as Tony stared at the empty doorway before him. He was completely shocked at what he’d just realized. Was **Thor** really afraid of **FRIDAY**? It was unbelievable… and slightly hilarious.

“Was it something I said?” asked FRIDAY, suddenly.

And Tony promptly lost his restraint and fell to the floor, laughing.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Natasha had a quick shower and changed into her pajamas and tried not to think about the man currently sitting in her sitting room waiting for her to join him. Bruce had followed her off the elevator onto her floor after she’d agreed to his request to talk. Rhodey had given her a questioning look at her silent agreement and Natasha had been touched at his concern as she’d shook her head at him.

She paused in the doorway of her bedroom that opened up to the sitting room and silently watched him. Sometimes it surprised Natasha; the depth of her feelings for this man. He wasn’t even her type – if she had a type – and he’d nearly killed her on two separate occasions, but she couldn’t deny she loved him. He was a brain, he was gentle, he was **good**… and he had blood in his ledger just like her. He was a man who didn’t want to fight because he knew he’d win. She saw him.

And he saw her.

But there was something different about him now, something had changed. Natasha wasn’t exactly sure what it was, but he wasn’t as conflicted over himself anymore. She could see it.
There was a calmness in him that hadn’t been there before. This man that she knew and loved so much had changed while he was away from her and she wasn’t sure if there was a place for her where he was now.

You see, Natasha had always been under the impression that it was Bruce’s conflict with himself that had given them their chance. He kept people at arms-length because of that continued conflict, but he’d let her in because she had the ability to calm the beast, something no one else could. She had been needed.

But he no longer needed her for that.

If he didn’t need her anymore how could he still want her? No one had ever wanted her before without needing something from her. And if they had it didn’t last long. There were three men in her life who wanted her without needing anything from her and all of them treated her more as a sister or daughter; none of them loved her the way she wanted Bruce to love her – the way Bruce once loved her.

Natasha knew they had to talk, that there were things between them that needed to be said, but she was afraid of what he would say. She couldn’t predict him – never could – and it left her feeling unsure of herself the way they were now. She didn’t like it. He made her feel like there was no ground beneath her feet and it worried her.

She’d never given him the words, made sure not to even, but somehow she’d still given him the power to destroy her and right now he was sitting on her couch, head back and eyes closed, oblivious to it all.

“You look tired.”

She kept from jumping as her eyes snapped back to his face. His eyes were still closed. It shouldn’t have surprised her that he knew she was there.

“I am,” she replied quietly in a near whisper, not wanting to break the peaceful quiet that had grown between them. “So are you.”

He opened his eyes then, brown eyes easily finding green. “We have to talk.”

She nodded, never breaking eye contact. No matter how she felt she would never stop him from saying what he needed to say.

Bruce regarded her silently for moment. He could see the slight wariness in her eyes, but it was eclipsed by the sheer exhaustion carefully hidden on her face. Slowly he stood and walked over to stand before her. He stood so close she had to tilt her head back a bit to keep eye contact with him.

“Maybe we sleep first?” he asked her, knowing neither of them were really in a mindset to talk.

“If that’s what you want,” she allowed, her eyes flicking back and forth between his. She needed to know one thing before she could sleep. “Just answer me one question; do you still want me?”

Bruce blinked then. He stared at her face, trying to figure out why she’d ask him that. Did she really think he wouldn’t want her? Or was this something else? Should he lie or tell the truth?

“Yes,” he replied, watching for her reaction. He’d never been very good at lying anyway.

Natasha watched him in return. After a few more moments of silence passed uninterrupted between them she nodded and held out her hand. When he took her hand in his she gave him a
genuine smile, the first since he returned. “Come on. Let’s sleep.”

He nodded, letting her pull him into her bedroom behind her. “And tomorrow we talk.”

They got into the bed after he stripped down to his boxers and undershirt. Once they were both settled with his arm around her waist and her head on his chest she released a small sigh and closed her eyes.

“Tomorrow we talk.”

Bruce released the breath he didn’t realize he was holding and relaxed at her words. He tightened the arm he had around her, pulling her closer as he tilted his face into her hair and finally closed his eyes. They fell asleep in each other’s arms knowing that while tomorrow would be hard, tonight didn’t have to be.

Tony stared at the writing pen in his hand as he sat on the couch in the living room of his penthouse. It was such an innocuous instrument no one would believe it could do what he was told it could. Hell, he barely believed it himself. It was part of the reason he was still sitting there doing nothing. Tony had been awake for over an hour now and he’d already showered, dressed and had a bagel smothered in cream cheese with his usual three cups of coffee and he couldn’t put off doing this any longer.

He’d promised Thor he’d get them some faster help to find his father and he wasn’t going to break his word to the god.

That didn’t change the fact that he felt absolutely ridiculous doing this. Unfortunately, he had no other way of contacting the man. He knew, because he’d tried. Repeatedly. But no matter how hard he looked neither he nor FRIDAY could find any contact information for him. It was only when Tony recalled his last encounter with the sorcerer that he’d remembered the pen he’d stashed in the safe in his bedroom.

…“…What is this?” he asked as he looked at the expensive ballpoint pen before giving the man in front of him with the ridiculous cape on a confused look.

“It’s a pen,” replied the sorcerer, carefully as if he was talking to a rather slow child.

“I know what it is,” Tony glared, completely unamused. He was a genius; of course he knew what a freakin’ pen was.

“Then why di-”

“Why are you giving me a pen?” he cut him off before the ass could aggravate him more.

“How else do you plan to contact me if you should require my assistance?”

“You want me to write and mail you a letter?” he asked with a dry tone. That was never going to happen, but he found it adorable that the sorcerer thought it would. “That’s what email is for. Or better yet, texting or even calling. All of these are faster and more likely to come from me.”

“I’m not likely to check my email any time soon and you’re welcome to call or send a text,” he nodded then waited a bit before adding, “And when I locate my phone I’ll be sure to reply.”

The smile that had bloomed on Tony’s face when he agreed to a phone call quickly fell as Strange
continued speaking. This man was one of the greatest surgeons on the planet and he was a primitive prick.

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?” he accused, suspicion heavy in his tone.

“It’s possible,” grinned Stephen Strange. It was more than possible; it was almost a guarantee. “You do remember how to use one of those, I assume?”

“Shut up.”

Strange out right smiled then. Tony was so fun to mess with and his obvious hatred for all things magic made it even more entertaining and difficult for Stephen to resist. He waved his hands in an intricate pattern and opened a portal beside him, but paused before stepping through to look at Tony once more.

“Oh. Mailing isn’t necessary. Just write and leave the rest to me and the pen,” he added then turned and walked through the portal, waving over his shoulder. “It was a pleasure as always Tony Stark.” ….

Strange had said this was the quickest and best way to contact him if he ever needed his assistance and Tony was going to hold the sorcerer to his word. He leaned forward and grabbed the steno note pad off the coffee table in front of him and flipped to a clean sheet and began to write before he could change his mind and scrap the whole idea.

Strange,

I’m writing you this letter and you have no idea how much this pains me, so you better not have been lying to me. I have a friend who could really use your help. His father has gone missing and it’s important we find him fast. I’ll fill you in when you get here. We are meeting in my workshop at 11. I’m sure you remember where it is. –Tony Stark

Tony stared down at what he wrote for a moment before placing the pad back on the coffee table then recapping and pocketing the pen. He hoped this worked, because while he was confident that he could find King Odin for Thor without the sorcerer’s help, he knew it would be much faster with it.

Tony stood up and headed for the elevator. He had an appointment with three children before he had to go into the office for a while that he didn’t want to miss. There was nothing more he could do at the penthouse now anyway but wait and he figured he could do that anywhere. It was just after eight he noticed as he glanced at the clock on his way out; he figured he could spend an hour with the Barton brats first and gathered the packages he left by the elevator that morning before getting on and hitting the button for the Barton’s floor.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Steve stopped in his apartment’s kitchen to grab a bottle of water from the fridge on his way to his living room. He usually preferred to have breakfast in the kitchen in the common area so he could spend time with everyone else as they come through in the mornings. In the past he was even known to make breakfast for everyone on occasion, but he really wasn’t in the mood for socializing and he wanted to have another look at the Accords before he met with Maria Hill in less than an hour.

He’d already read through the entire document once and had to, grudgingly, admit that it was much better than its predecessor. He’d even added some notes in the margins that he wanted to talk to
someone about partially as a way of proving to himself that he was really reading it this time and partially because he was genuinely curious as to what Tony, Natasha and the rest had accomplished while he was in exile.

There were things he still didn’t agree with, but he was willing to admit that maybe Tony had a point about accountability. When T’challa had told him what Zemo had told him for why he’d done what he’d done to the Avengers he’d first been angry at him for bringing Bucky into it, but later after he’d thought more about it he couldn’t help but feel sorry for the man. They’d gone to Sokovia to save people and that man had lost his entire family even though they’d been no where near the battle. After it was over they’d all been able to go home, walk away and lick their wounds, but so many of who they were there to protect did not.

Natasha and Tony were right; there had to be a better way.

Perhaps people like Zemo wouldn’t be created from their destruction if there was a better way… but he wasn’t sure that way was chaining himself to a government who would always have their own agenda beyond protecting the people. And he could see from the new Accords that some of that had changed, but there were things that hadn’t. The Avengers and all enhanced individuals no longer had to obey the UN, but they did have to answer to them and the President of the United States. They could be called in to assist on a mission from both the President and the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D, but they were not obligated to accept the mission. The choice belonged to them, but the Avengers and all enhanced who signed the Accords would be treated like agents even though they were not officially considered agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. It was more like the Avengers was an agency all to itself now, but affiliated with S.H.I.E.L.D.

But any mission they took on, with or without S.H.I.E.L.D, had to be accompanied by a protection and rescue op or the Avengers were not allowed to assist. That he had an issue with. What exactly did that mean? They had to have a plan in place for civilians or they couldn’t help? How was that at all fair? It wasn’t always possible for them to fight the enemy and protect and rescue the people… most of the time that wasn’t possible unless they had help from S.H.I.E.L.D. So did that mean if they were on a mission without S.H.I.E.L.D then they weren’t allowed to help? And what happened if they did anyway? Could there even be a mission without S.H.I.E.L.D? This was the reason why he didn’t want the government pulling their strings.

They were still holding the cards even when it looked like they weren’t.

Maybe he could talk to Maria about it, but then again he’d figured it would probably be best for everyone to be present when he brought up his questions. Perhaps he’d ask Maria to set up a meet with Fury for all of them as soon as possible. He knew not only the director, but the President was also waiting for their decision on whether to sign or retire.

Steve already knew he wouldn’t be retiring. He wouldn't leave Tony to run all of this alone any more. He could see the strain it had put on the other man having to do all of this, deal with the government and keep to his obligations with SI. If there was one thing he regretted in all of this it was his decision to leave Tony alone to clean up his mess.

But he hadn’t seen any other way at the time. Honestly, he hadn’t even thought about the ‘after’ at all; he’d just been doing whatever was necessary to protect Bucky.

“Captain Rogers, I was asked to inform you Agent Maria Hill has arrived for your meeting.”

“Thank you, FRIDAY,” replied Steve as he looked up. For a moment he thought the A.I. had forgiven him, but when he received no reply back he knew she hadn’t. He figured Maria or Tony had requested the A.I. inform him and stood to make his way to the stairs. He thought it was
probably best not to use the elevator after the A.I. had been forced to speak to him; besides the common floor was only one floor up.

"Uncle Tony," began Lila, eyes wide. Tony looked at the little girl before him and braced himself. He knew that look. Whenever Lila had that look on her face she was about to ask one of those questions he never knew how to answer. "Does mommy hate daddy now? Is that why we live with you now?"

Exactly like he thought; impossible questions.

"I-" Tony cut himself off and sighed. He looked around the little girl’s room and, seeing the bed as the only other option, sat down on the large purple and green plush bean bag near the corner. He made sure not to glance up at the air vent in the opposite corner as he passed before he looked back at the seven year old playing with her Barbie Dream Tower he’d made for her. "Come here, Lila-bear," he beckoned with a hand.

Lila looked at him for a moment before she sat her Barbie down and grabbed her plushie Iron Man and moved over to where Tony sat, immediately climbing into his lap. Tony grunted in surprise but quickly folded his legs beneath her as he helped her settle. He smiled down at her as she turned her father’s green eyes on him, expectantly.

"Okay, well, first I don’t think your mom hates your dad . . . she’s just . . . a little mad with him right now."

"She’s been mad at him a lot," she agreed with a nod.

"Yeah..." Tony sighed and tried not to feel guilty for that. He had to remind himself he was not the one who asked Clint to come back. "Your dad did something that your mom is having a hard time forgiving him for."

"Mmhmm, he left," said Lila, emphatically with a nod.

Tony blinked at her tone. Okay, so no mincing words here, he thought with an internal nod to himself. "You are seven, aren’t you?"

Lila nodded as she gave him a curious look.

"He always leaves."

Both of them turned to the new voice to see Cooper leaning in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest and looking so much like his father. Lila turned back to look at Tony then as Cooper did the same; both waiting for an answer.

Tony tilted his head and gave them both a contemplative look as he thought just what to say. "Come sit, mini-hawk," he beckoned to the boy and waited for him to settle on the floor in front of him and Lila. He watched as Cooper gently laid down the bow and quiver of arrows he’d brought downstairs that morning for him and could instantly tell Cooper really liked them.

Tony took a deep breath and sent a silent prayer to whatever god was listening that he wouldn’t ruin Clint’s relationship with his children any further. He wanted so badly to tell them to go talk to their mother, but he knew what it felt like to be brushed off by an adult as a child and didn’t want to make them feel like they couldn’t talk to him; no matter how misguided on their part he thought that was.
“It’s hard sharing your dad with the world isn’t it?” he asked then nodded with them when they did in reply. “Yeah, I know how that is. I had to share my dad with the rest of the world, too, and it wasn’t always great.” It was more like the world had to share Howard with him, but you know, close enough. “Your dad made a choice to help a friend he believed needed saving. He didn’t do it to hurt you guys or your mom.”

“Yeah, but why does it always have to be him?” asked Cooper with huff. “Isn’t that what Captain America is for? Besides, dad had quit; he didn’t have to go anymore.”

“Those are all very good points,” nodded Tony. They really were good points and he’d probably have asked the same if he was in Cooper's shoes and had a dad who’d actually gave a damn about him. Sad thing is, he had asked his mom when he was a child, maybe four or five years old. He still remembered her non-answer, too. Tony froze then as an idea hit him. “Have you two ever heard the tale of the tortoise and the scorpion?”

Both children shook their heads as Cooper shot him a skeptical look, but remained quiet.

“Okay, well once there was a scorpion and he was traveling with his friend, the tortoise, when they soon came to a river. The scorpion was sad because he wanted to cross, but scorpions can’t swim. In a stroke of inspiration, the scorpion asked his friend the tortoise, to carry him across the river on his shell. The tortoise told the scorpion no because the scorpion had a sharp stinger on his tail and he believed his friend would sting him if he let him on his back and he told the scorpion so. The scorpion replied that of course he wouldn’t sting the tortoise, because that would cause them both to drown. There was no logic in that, right? So, the tortoise, agreeing, believed his friend and let him on his shell and immediately began to swim across the river. When they were half way across the tortoise felt a sharp sting to his neck and quickly began to freeze. As they both sank beneath the water the tortoise, accepting what had happened, turned to his friend, the scorpion, and asked him one last question. He said, ‘you said it wasn’t logical for you to sting me, so why did you do it?’ he paused and looked at them both and seeing he had their full attention continued. ‘And the scorpion replied, ‘it’s not logic. It’s just my nature’. Do you two understand?’

Lila and Cooper exchanged identical looks before looking back at Tony and shaking their heads. “If the tortoise was his friend why did the scorpion sting him?” asked Lila.

“Because it’s a scorpion’s nature to sting, sweet pea,” he replied as he looked between them both. “Just like it’s your dad’s nature to protect people. We can’t deny who we are or change it, but that doesn’t mean your dad doesn’t love you guys and your mom and Nate very much. No matter how often he leaves to save someone it’s you guys he will always come back to. You understand?”

Lila nodded as she hugged her plushie close. “And we should be nice to daddy because he doesn’t do it to hurt us, just like the tortoise was nice to the scorpion even though his friend hurt him.”

Tony blinked. And the teacher learns from the student…. Tony swallowed and looked away from young eyes that suddenly seemed all too-knowing. “Exactly,” he nodded.

“Like you and Mr. Steve,” nodded Cooper, looking at him. “You forgave him and brought him home with dad even though mom said he hurt you. Though I don’t know what it was Mr. Steve did that it was in his nature to do,” he added with a shrug only a kid could give after saying something so profound.

Tony tapped his fingers against his chest, unconsciously as he tightened the arm he had around Lila. “He protected a friend.”

Lila looked at him curiously then. “Were you trying to hurt Mr. Steve’s friend, Uncle Tony?”
“I thought he was a bad guy,” he nodded, answering automatically. Tony felt like he was having an outer body experience, like he was on the outside looking in.

“Huh.”

And just like that, Tony came back to himself as he looked at the little girl curiously. A seven year old should *not* be able to make such a small sound have so much *meaning*. He or Steve was *so* being judged by a seven year old right now. “What is it, sweet pea?”

“I just don’t get it, I guess,” she shrugged and looked at her Iron Man toy, plucking at its fur. “You’re Mr. Steve’s friend, too, right? Why hurt one friend to protect another? Makes no sense to me, but I’m only seven. Maybe it’s a grown-up thing.”

From the mouths of babes’, indeed, thought Tony with a shake of his head. Maybe the wrong people were running the Avengers, because obviously even a child could do better.

“She’s right,” agreed Cooper with a nod of his head as he picked up his bow. “Grown-ups are weird.”

Tony agreed completely. “It’s complicated,” he tried instead though.

Cooper shook his head and gave him his dad’s smirk, perfectly. “That’s what adults say when they don’t have a good answer.”

Tony laughed then. “True,” he said, because what else was there to say? “Where were you going with those?” he asked the twelve year old as he nodded at the bow and arrows, thinking it was a good time to change the subject.

“I was going to ask you to help me practice,” replied Cooper as he looked back at Tony.

“I could,” nodded Tony before asking, “But don’t you think you should ask your dad instead?”

“He won’t do it. He doesn’t even know I made the archery team in school,” he shrugged again, trying to make it look as if his dad helping him or not didn’t matter. Tony knew better though. He’d been there before; it *always* matters. “Why can’t you do it?”

“Because when you need to learn something you learn from the best is what my dad always said and it’s actually one of the few things he said that I agree with,” he replied. Okay, it was the only thing Howard said that he agreed with but, again, close enough. “And in archery there is no one better than your dad.”

Cooper sighed but nodded.

Tony hated that look on his face. He refused for the boy to end up like him; hating and resenting his dad. Clint had better take this olive branch he was giving him, because Cooper was getting to an age where he was going to soon stop forgiving and just start accepting and that should be the last thing Clint wanted.

“I tell you what, mini-me, I’ll make a deal with you,” he said and waited for Cooper to look at him before continuing with his bargain. “You ask your dad to practice with you and if he says he can’t you come find me, okay?”

“You promise?”

“I promise,” Tony nodded. “But you won’t need it, because I know your dad will say yes. He gets
to spend time with you and shoot things; best of both worlds. Why would he say no?”

Cooper studied him quietly for a moment then grinned. “Okay, deal.”

“Good,” smiled Tony as he stood up with Lila then bent to place her on her feet once he’d gained his. “Now, unfortunately, I have to go. I have to go into the office soon and Pepper will frown at me if I’m late.”

“Aunt Pepper always frowns at you,” smiled Lila as he looked down at her.

“True,” he agreed. “You think she’d be use to me by now,” he sighed and shook his head. “Well, you two, I will see you guys later. Be good for your mom and dad, okay.” he said as he bent and kissed the little girl on her cheek then squeezed Cooper on the shoulder before heading for the door.

“Bye Uncle Tony,” said Lila as she and Cooper watched him leave.

He gave them one last wave as he left and headed for the kitchen where he knew Natasha and Laura were at, probably still talking. Moments later he entered the kitchen and was unsurprised to see both women still sitting at the small table across from one another where he’d left them nearly forty-five minutes earlier. Tony took a seat at the table without being invited and immediately dropped his head heavily against the wooden surface, ignoring the questioning looks he knew he was getting.

“Ouch.”

“Everything alright, Tony?” asked Laura, exchanging a curious look with the redhead.

“Unca Ohnie!” exclaimed Nathaniel from his mother’s lap with a clap of his hands and a squeal.

“I see someone’s awake now,” muttered Tony without lifting his head. Nathaniel had been down for a nap when he’d first arrived. “Your children are equal parts amazing and terrifying,” he declared as he lifted his head with a sigh and then leaned over and took the two year old that was straining against his mother’s hold to get to him.

“Hey little guy,” he smiled as he stood the baby in his lap.

“Ohnie!” said Nate as he slapped his hands on either side of Tony’s face before he started trying to pluck at Tony’s goatee. Unlike his older siblings, Nate had his mother’s liquid brown eyes and he aimed them happily at Tony in delight to see him.

“Tony?” asked Natasha, a grin on her face. If the world could see Tony Stark now they might just realize they didn’t know the man half as well as they thought they did.

“It’s nothing Nat,” he shook his head as he glanced at both ladies before turning his attention back to the baby in his hands. “Just some wisdom imparted from the heavens by an unlikely source.”

“Ah,” uttered Laura. Both ladies nodding in understanding. “It’s amazing how they do that isn’t it? To witness just how much they understand.”

“Yeah,” nodded Tony as he mouthed at Nate’s cheeks before rubbing his goatee gently against him, “And terrifying.”

“Did they give you the looks of heavy judging?” asked Natasha with a curious tilt of her head.
“God, yes,” sighed Tony as he turned Nate around and sat him down in his lap. “All the judging; though I can’t say if it was aimed more at me or Rogers.”

“Don’t worry,” said Laura with a smile, “whichever it is, they love their Uncle Tony. If that hasn’t changed yet it’s not going to.”

Tony nodded. “They think you hate Clint,” he suddenly said, not knowing how to ease into it. “Lila asked me if you did.”

“What?” asked Laura, alarmed. “Of course I don’t hate Clint. Why would she-” she broke off then, thinking better of asking that question to Tony at seeing his wide-eyed look. “What did you tell her?”

“Just that,” he said as he rubbed an idle hand over Nate’s brown locks, “that you were only mad not that you hated him. I told them that it was Clint’s nature to protect people, but that it didn’t mean he didn’t love them.”

Laura nodded, grateful. “Thank you, Tony. Last thing I want is for them to think their father doesn’t care.”

“I know and me either,” he said standing and handing Nate over to his namesake since he was already reaching for her. “No need to thank me; I would never wish that feeling on any child.”

“Where are you off to?” she asked as she took the two year old and hugged him close for a moment.

“I have to run into the office for a bit. Pepper has hired me a temporary assistant I need to go meet while she looks for me a permanent one.”

“What happened to Alice?”

“Had the baby and is out on maternity leave, but I have a feeling she won’t be returning.”

“Good,” nodded Natasha as she stood. Neither her nor Pepper had any love for Tony’s assistant, who made it very obvious she thought Tony was scum for fighting against Captain America. She was happy to see the idiot woman go and it was only the fact the woman had been pregnant that had kept Natasha from putting the fear of God in the woman – though from the way the woman tended to disappear or sit nervously at her desk, afraid to even breathe wrong, whenever Natasha came around made her believe she hadn’t been that successful in her restraint.

Natasha handed Nate over to his mother before placing a kiss on the baby’s chubby cheek. “I’ll head out with you,” she said to him then looked at Laura. “I’ll talk to you later, Laura.”

“Alright, Tasha,” she nodded as she settled her son in her arms before standing with them. “Remember what I said; talk to him. If you really want to do this – and I think you do – than talk to him.”

Natasha nodded quietly as she hugged her friend. “And maybe take your own advice, hmm?” she smiled as Laura frowned at her before turning towards Tony and the door.

“Don’t be a stranger, Tony,” said Laura as she came over to him and stretched up to kiss him on the cheek. “And stop working so hard. It’s okay to let others do some of the work, you know.”

Tony grinned. “I make no promises.”
Laura shook her head as she watched them leave then turned to make something for Nate to eat. Sometimes she wondered how this was her life, she sighed as she sent a silent prayer for her friends to soon find their happiness.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~

Maria Hill looked around at the occupants of the room as they all looked at their copy of the Accords in front of them. “None of you have to decide right now, as you know, but the President and Director Fury would like an answer soon.”

“I have already decided to sign,” spoke Wanda into the silence that followed Maria.

Clint looked at her then. “Wanda?” He’d been late to the meeting and wondered if he’d missed something as he looked around the table at the others, but they all looked just as shocked as him.

“It is my decision, Clint,” replied Wanda, meeting his gaze. “This is the right step for me.”

“Are you sure about this, Wanda?” asked Steve, looking over at her. He was doing his best not to look at the blonde who had showed up, unannounced, with Maria so was secretly thankful for the other woman’s outburst grabbing his attention. Steve would never take away Wanda’s right to choose, but he wanted to be sure she knew what she was doing.

“Yes,” replied Wanda with a nod. “I think accountability is right. We must be held responsible.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Everyone turned at the sound of Natasha’s voice, not having heard her enter. They were all surprised to see not only her, but Tony standing behind her looking uncomfortable.

“Natasha?” asked Steve, standing up. Her and Tony weren’t apart of this meeting, so why were they here? “What’s going on?”

“We agreed no more secrets, right Steve?” she replied with a question of her own, crossing her arms.

“Well,” Steve blinked. They really hadn’t. At least not in so many words, but… he wasn’t going to be the one to contradict Natasha. Not with that look on her face. “Sure, I guess so.”

“Good,” she said then turned her attention back to Wanda. “When were you going to tell us?”

“I do not know what you mean,” replied Wanda, trying not to fidget as she slowly folded her hands on the table.

Natasha’s eyes hardened as she saw the telling red glow around the witch’s hands flare up for a moment before flickering back out. “Do it and you’ll regret it; you won’t get in my head a second time.” She paused a moment to be sure Wanda understood she was very serious before continuing. “Now am I going to tell them or you?”

“Wait a minute. What’s going on, Tasha?” Clint looked between the two women, worry clear on his face. Natasha was not the type to threaten people idly, so if she was angry enough to do so there had to be a reason.

“Ask Wanda,” she said, eyes never leaving the witch. “Ask her who is really responsible for Ultron and Sokovia.”
“What?” said Clint looking around the room and seeing the curious looks on everyone, but Tony’s face. He couldn’t tell what Tony was thinking as he wasn’t looking in his direction, but he could tell the billionaire had his mask on. “Come on, Tasha, this is old. Haven’t we moved passed this? We all know Tony and Dr. Banner created Ultron.”

“Not when we don’t know the truth,” Natasha said, voice hard. “Yes, Tony made Ultron. Tell them why he did it, Wanda. You say you’re all about accountability now.”

“Wanda?” asked Steve, suspicious. “What is Nat talking about?”

“I-I…” Wanda shook her head and stood, slamming her hands on the table. “It was not my fault! How was I to know?! He made him, not I!”

“It is your fault!” replied Natasha stepping forward, venom dripping from every word. “You play around in peoples’ heads and then leave others to deal with the consequences. You are responsible for Johannesburg and you are responsible for Sokovia. You don’t get to unleash the beast in others and then say ‘it’s not my fault’ when they harm innocent people. And you don’t get to hide behind Steve and Clint any longer, either. Tell them.”

Wanda's entire being flared up bright red, but Natasha saw it coming a whole second before everyone else and was across the space separating them with a knife at the witch’s throat before anyone else had even moved.

“Go ahead, give me a reason,” she breathed, green eyes as hard as the blade in her hand. “I have absolutely zero fucks right now.”

“All I wanted was a cup of coffee…” muttered Tony with a shake of his head. He shrugged when a few gazes flicked to him, but they all turned back to the Widow who hadn’t moved at all.

“Tell them,” Natasha ordered, ignoring Tony behind her.

Wanda stared back at the other woman and she could see that she was very serious; she would slit her throat before she could even start to use her powers. Her eyes flicked to the man behind Natasha and wondered, not for the first time, how such a person was able to garner such loyalty from so many extraordinary people. Even Vision was loyal to the billionaire and she couldn’t understand why.

She looked back at the redhead before her and took deep breaths as she struggled to pull her powers back. No matter how powerful she was, she knew it was Natasha who had the upper hand here.

“I gave him a vision of the future,” she began softly, almost in a whisper and not looking at any of them. “He saw all of you die in a battle and there was nothing he could do to stop it.”

“When?” said Steve, crossing his arms and trying to keep a clear head. “When did this happen? Because I know it didn’t happen when you messed with me and the others because Tony had to go after the Hulk.”

Natasha stepped back then as the red glow around Wanda fully disappeared. She slowly crossed her arms again but did not let go of her knife.

“No,” said Wanda with a shake of her head, still not looking at anyone. She figured there was no point in hiding anything; Natasha would just tell them if she didn’t. “It was before then. In Sokovia when you first retrieved the scepter from von Strucker.”
“So you gave him a vision of all of us dying then all of a sudden Tony gets the bright idea to create a protector to fight for us so we don’t have to be in danger…” Steve shook his head then as the conversation he’d had with Tony at Clint’s farm suddenly made a lot more sense. “To win a battle before it happens…” he breathed as he looked over at Tony, who he found was already looking at him. They stared at one another for a long moment before Steve cleared his throat and looked away.

He didn’t miss the look Sharon aimed at them.

“Why?”

“You must understand, Steve,” began Wanda, pleadingly as she finally looked at them all before turning to him. “I didn’t know any of you then. I was just so angry at all of you for working with him and at him, especially. He doesn’t deserve it! He doesn’t deserve any of you! He killed my parents!”

“No,” cut in Maria, speaking for the first time. “What happened to your parents was not Stark’s fault. It wasn’t even America who dropped that mortar on your home. We actually have intel that the people who did that may have been a faction of HYDRA, but it was never confirmed. How they got their hands on SI weapons was our main concern at the time. You and your brother had ended up on S.H.I.E.L.D’s radar long before you both went off grid; I assume that was when you volunteered for HYDRA.”

Wanda stared at her, disbelievingly, as she stepped back, pressing a hand to her throat. It couldn’t be true… Everything her and her brother did… the fighting and the protesting… and they’d handed themselves over to the very people who had destroyed their lives? Wanda shook her head as she looked at them all. It couldn’t be!

“This is what you were talking about when we were battling Ultron in Sokovia, isn’t it?” asked Clint, suddenly understanding. “I thought you were feeling guilty for once choosing to help him, but you weren’t talking about that at all. You were talking about what you did to Tony… because that’s what lead to Ultron and, in the end, Sokovia being destroyed.”

“Johannesburg, Sokovia, Lagos, the Accords… you are behind so much destruction yet you have taken no responsibility for any of it. You want to sit and point fingers, blame Tony for what happened to your parents, but who gets to stand and blame you?” said Natasha, having absolutely no mercy. “And all this time you sat back and let Tony take the blame for what you caused.”

“Natasha.”

“No, Steve,” said Natasha looking at him then, tired of him trying to shield Wanda from everything. “She is not a child; she doesn’t need you protecting her. Her powers are too strong and too dangerous for her not to be held responsible for them. She’s the reason the Accords were created and this is why. What we do have consequences and if she can’t handle that than maybe she shouldn’t be here.”

“I hear you, Nat, just… wait a minute. Please?” he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He was getting a headache.


“And on that note, I’m going to go,” said Tony, touching Nat’s shoulder. “I’ll see you later. FRIDAY has almost completed the list.”
“Tony wait,” began Steve as he looked at the engineer. “You don’t have to go. We can all talk about this.”

“I’ve heard enough, Cap, and besides I’m already late to meet Pepper for SI business,” he said, studiously not returning Clint’s stare. “I’m sure you can handle this without me.”

“Tony-”

“Let him go, Steve,” spoke up Sharon for the first time as she put a hand on Steve’s arm. “Running is what he does.”

“Agent Carter,” said Tony, turning his attention to the blonde agent. “Why are you in my tower?”

“I can go where I please,” she said with a glare. “And besides, I’m here to see Steve.”

“Not here you can’t,” he replied, glare just as strong. His eyes flickered to the hand she had on Steve’s arm before returning her gaze. Tony narrowed his eyes as she lifted her chin slightly and shuffled a bit closer to Steve. “See him somewhere else. You know the rules; be gone before I return or I’ll remove you myself.”

“Tony!”

“You can’t hate me forever, Tony,” she exclaimed, both of them ignoring Steve.

“You shouldn’t sell yourself short, Agent 13; I have every belief you can inspire a great amount of hate for a very long time.”

“Missed you at the funeral,” she replied, acidly. “Let me guess, too busy? Aunt Peggy would have been so disappointed.”

“Well, considering you spent most of your time ogling her lost love, I doubt you can accurately say who was or wasn’t there, so I’m pretty sure I’m doing okay where Aunt Peggy is concerned. How’s your conscience?”

Sharon physically flinched then. He obviously wasn’t pulling his punches this time. She wondered, idly, what she’d done to truly piss him off this time. “I can visit him if I want to, Tony.”

“You can’t hate me forever, Tony,” she exclaimed, both of them ignoring Steve.

“You shouldn’t sell yourself short, Agent 13; I have every belief you can inspire a great amount of hate for a very long time.”

“Missed you at the funeral,” she replied, acidly. “Let me guess, too busy? Aunt Peggy would have been so disappointed.”

“Well, considering you spent most of your time ogling her lost love, I doubt you can accurately say who was or wasn’t there, so I’m pretty sure I’m doing okay where Aunt Peggy is concerned. How’s your conscience?”

They glared at one another for a moment longer before she huffed, crossed her arms, and looked away. Mood completely soured.

“You know your way out,” he said to her, staring, before his gaze flicked to Steve and then he turned and walked out.

Nobody said anything; most of them never having seen Tony Stark truly angry before now. It was one thing to fight Iron Man over the Accords and the law; it was another to see Tony Stark glaring mad.

“Aunt Peggy?”

“What?” asked Sharon with a frown towards the empty doorway before she looked to Steve in confusion.

“He said ‘Aunt Peggy’…”
“Oh. Well yeah,” she replied with a curious look. “You didn’t know? I mean there’s no actual blood between them or anything, but Aunt Peggy was really good friends with Howard and Maria Stark and has known Tony all his life. She was an honorary aunt and it’s what he called her. They were actually pretty close, though I hate to admit it. You really didn’t know?”

“I had no idea…” he shook his head. “Tony never said… I never saw him with her.”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, “he actually visited her more often than I did and he paid for her time in hospice. I thought it was odd I didn’t see him at the funeral.”

“He was there,” cut in, Natasha. “We left right after, but he went.”

Steve stared at them. How had he not known this? He didn’t notice Tony at the funeral either… Did anyone help Tony get through the death of an aunt he was apparently very close to? Steve felt like an idiot. He should have guessed that Tony would know Peggy with how close she’d been to Howard and then later, Maria. But it had never even crossed his mind. He’d been so caught up in his own grief that he didn’t see anyone else’s…. Yet you had time to notice Sharon, said the voice in his head that was beginning to get very annoying.

“Why does it matter?” asked Sharon with a roll of her eyes, completely missing the glare Natasha shot at her as she’d turned, fully, to look at Steve. “Can we talk in private? I will have to leave soon.”

“Oh yeah,” said Steve with a slight nod as he looked down at her hand on his arm. He gently removed it as he turned to the others. “Will you excuse us guys? And, uh, Maria could you ask Director Fury if he could meet with us next Monday? I think that will give us all plenty of time to decide what we want to do and on any questions we might have.”

They all nodded except for Wanda, who was currently staring down at her hands. She desperately wanted to retreat to her floor, but she didn’t want to just walk out and bring more attention to herself. But she really needed some time alone to think and process.

“Wanda,” her head snapped up when Steve called her, looking him dead in the eyes. “We’ll talk later alright?”

After a moment’s hesitation she nodded then looked around at everyone else before coming back to Steve. She met his gaze for one more moment before leaving the room.

“You guys might want to keep her away from Bruce, since you’re both so invested in protecting her,” said Natasha to Steve and Clint as she watched Wanda leave. “He hasn’t forgotten what she did to him. And neither has the Hulk.”

“Come on, Tasha, you can’t be that upset about this.”

“Yes, I can and I am,” she turned to him then. “Open your eyes, Clint. She is not some damsel that needs rescuing. She is a powerhouse with an incredible power; one that she chose to be. She doesn’t need you or Steve to protect her. What she needs is to be treated as the adult she is. Tell me, if I or Sam or Tony had been the ones to have killed those people in Lagos or lied to you about Ultron would you have stood there and told us it wasn’t our fault?” She turned to look at Steve then. “Or taken the blame for us?”

Clint and Steve exchanged uneasy looks as they looked at her. Neither of them knew what to say, because Natasha was right. If one of the others had made the same mistake Wanda had neither of them would have treated them the same way.
“That’s what I thought,” she said with a nod. “Wake up, you two. Wanda is a ticking time bomb and if she doesn’t get a handle on her anger and hurt the next time she slips may just be worse and she really will end up on The Raft.”

Natasha looked at them silently for a moment then turned and walked out.

Steve sighed. This was all getting out of hand. He’d have to deal with it later though. First he had to talk to Sharon… and figure out a way to let her know that he had made a mistake and didn’t want to start a relationship with her. Now he knew why he’d held off on doing anything with her before; kissing her wasn’t late, it should never have happened at all.

As he nodded good bye to the others he turned to lead Sharon down to his floor and hoped that he wasn’t about to lose a good friend when it was all over.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Tony sipped his Starbucks’ coffee as he entered the elevator and hit the button for his office. He’d had to come down here to the lobby and get himself some coffee since he’d not been able to get any upstairs. Tony stared straight ahead at his distorted reflection in the closed elevator doors at he tried to not think about anything at all.

He was really doing his best not to think about Steve and Sharon fucking in his tower.

She just had to touch him. Tony’s jaw ticked and he drank from his coffee in effort to hold back the jealous rage. He hated feeling this way. He hated it even more that he was feeling it over her. What the fuck! Like he had any reason to ever be jealous of that ungrateful little shit.

Except for Steve.

Everything seemed to always come back to him these days and it was really starting to annoy the hell out of him. If his pseudo-cousin was who the Cap wanted to fuck that was his decision, but he’d be damned if it was going to happen in his tower. Yeah, he was being petty, but fuck it, he didn’t care.

When he’d seen her the moment he’d walked into the common room floor he’d been prepared and had already decided he’d just ignore her. FRIDAY had already told him she’d come with Hill and he’d assumed it was probably for the same reason, but just for the CIA and he’d decided to just let her do what she had to do and then leave. And it had almost worked.

Then she touched him.

In that moment Tony couldn’t have stopped the rage if he’d tried. It took all his will just to hide it and even then Tony knew he’d slipped and she’d seen it. He saw the smirk grow on her face and he knew she believed she’d finally won something over him. And even if that was true he didn’t have to give her the satisfaction of seeing how it hurt him. And he didn’t. The satisfaction he felt when he told her to get out, right there in front of everyone was euphoric.

She obviously didn’t think he’d kick her out because she was Cap’s girlfriend, but that was her mistake. Trying to throw Aunt Peggy in his face when it was her who was always too busy to visit the older woman after her illness had gotten worse was her second mistake. She wanted to pretend and act like Aunt Peggy was so important to her, that was her business and she could do it on her time where he couldn’t see it. Because he knew the truth and the truth was Sharon spent so much time being jealous and envious of Aunt Peggy’s reputation and career that she could barely stand to be in the woman’s presence for any real length of time.
Aunt Peggy had done and given so much for her and in the end she’d thrown it back at the older woman. When Peggy had first brought Sharon to the US and had asked Tony to help her Tony had been happy to. He’d been so eager to meet more family of his favorite Aunt as all he’d ever know was her brother, Uncle Nicky, and her husband and children. So when Sharon had showed up he’d been just as happy as Aunt Peggy.

He’d even been impressed when she’d chose to follow in her footsteps and join S.H.I.E.L.D, but not use her last name so she could grow and progress under her own merit. Tony had thought that was very mature and commendable of her, but as time had gone on things had changed and so had Sharon.

She’d treated Aunt Peggy unfairly and had even said some pretty harsh things when the older woman’s illness was first starting to show and even though she’d later apologized and had been forgiven before Peggy had completely forgotten who she was; Tony had never really been able to do the same.

Tony had, essentially, washed his hands of Sharon and they had barely spoken in the last ten years. He wasn’t in any rush for that to change and he was sure Sharon felt the same, so why she thought it was okay to come to his tower and start trying to throw her weight around was beyond him. It wasn’t going to happen though no matter whom she decided to date.

And if she touched what was his one more time, he thought angrily as he stalked off the elevator to his office, she’d learn just what he was capable of. Steve was his.

Wait. What?

Tony froze just outside the double doors to his office in stunned shock. Did he really just think that? His heart pounded as he tapped his fingers against his chest, eyes glazed as he tried to make sense of his own thoughts. He knew he had an attraction to Steve – in all honesty, he’d had one for years – but he’d never tried to lay claim to the other man… had never really even entertained the thought. Steve had never shown any interest in men or him, one way or another, and when he’d finally got the feeling that maybe Steve would be open to such a relationship with another man it was Barnes he’d figured would be the one.

So why was he subconsciously laying claim to him now?

Tony slowly opened the door to his office then and made his way to his desk, dropping heavily into his chair. It was only just past ten am and this day already felt too long. How was he going to get through the rest of it at this rate?

“Tony, you’re late,” said Pepper as she suddenly entered his office without knocking. Not that she ever did. Tony took note of another woman entering behind her, but paid neither of them any true attention. “Tony? Is everything okay?”

Pepper eyed him, suspiciously, but didn’t call him out on the lie. She had a feeling she knew what
the issue was about and while she had no real problem talking to him about Steve she could see how it would be awkward for Tony. And maybe even a little for her.

“You’re late. I’ve brought your new assistant. She’s up to date on all projects we are currently working on and though she’s temporary she has agreed to stay on until I can find a suitable replacement.”

“And what of Alice, Pepper? I thought she was only on maternity leave. Has she decided to quit?”

“She hasn’t quit, but I’m sure she’d like to spend more than 8 weeks with her new born; it is her first child after all,” said Pepper with a careless shrug as she looked down at her clipboard, not meeting his gaze. “I think it’s a good idea and maybe she’ll take some time to find a job closer to home now she has a child. She’s always complained about the commute.”

“Right, she did that,” he nodded, suppressing his grin. “And I imagine you suggested all of these good ideas to her when she left?”

“Yes,” Pepper looked up and met his gaze then. She could hear the amusement in his voice and knew he’d already figured her out. “I suggested them while presenting her with her severance package that she didn’t deserve. She should be glad she was pregnant or she wouldn’t have received that much.”

Tony outright grinned at her then, brown eyes twinkling merrily.

“Oh hush,” she replied with a small smile of her own. “I was perfectly polite.”

“I don’t doubt that. I’ve seen you cut down many members of the press while being perfectly polite.”

She smiled at him then. “It’s never undeserved.” Pepper looked back down at her notes for a moment before continuing. “Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted. This is your new assistant, Kisa… uhh how exactly do you say that?” she asked turning to the woman standing slightly behind and to the left of her.

“Just Kisa is fine ma’am,” she replied with a small smile.

“Then you must call me, Pepper, please.”

“Alright, Pepper.”

Both women turned to look at Tony, but he was too busy staring at the new woman before him. He hadn’t paid her much attention when she’d first entered with Pepper, but he was now. She was striking, if ever there was a word for the vision before him. And short. She had a smooth, caramel skin tone, almond shaped eyes that were better described as lavender instead of blue – he’d never seen eyes that color before – and a full mouth made for kissing. She had curves any man would enjoy getting lost in and long, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. But in all of that beauty it wasn’t her looks that had him staring… it was her voice.

He’d heard that voice before but, for the life of him, he couldn’t place when or where. It was a sweet voice, almost smokey-like, and heavily accented. Tony found he also had trouble placing the accent, which had never happened to him before. Her voice sounded like a mix of Greek, something European and almost Indian. It was strange, yet not unpleasant.

And he was certain he’d heard it before.
“Tony?” Pepper asked, confused at the look on his face.

“Have we met before?” he asked the other woman as he shook his head at Pepper.

Pepper looked between the two before aiming a suspicious look at Kisa. She hoped this wasn’t another Natalie Rushman thing, because while she now counted Natasha as one of her closest friends she still did not look favorably on that time she’d been lying to them.

“Not really,” she said with a shrug. “I know who you are though, of course, and I did promise you we would meet again. I always keep my promises.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” asked Pepper, suddenly, looking at the woman beside her. She liked Kisa, she didn’t want to have to fire her, but she would if she was only there to spy on Tony.

“No,” replied Tony, cutting in when he saw Kisa open her mouth to reply. “Okay, I’ve met my new assistant – welcome aboard, Kisa – what’s next?”

Pepper narrowed her eyes at him, but let it go for now. She’d find out what he wasn’t telling her later. “The press have arrived and they’re currently waiting for you outside. You are due to make the statement you promised them in just under ten minutes.”

“Statement?” he asked.

“Tony, you promised to give them a statement on the status of The Avengers this morning at 10:30. Some of them have been here for almost an hour.”

“Shit,” he sighed. He’d completely forgotten about the press statement. “Okay, fine. Did I at least prepare a statement?”

“No. When I reminded you two days ago you said you’d handle it and I left you to it.”

“Okay, I’ll just wing it,” he nodded as he stood. “Not like there’s much to tell anyway. Do I look presentable?”

“You know you do.”

“Good, well that’s one less thing to worry about. You come with me; you’re my assistant so you’re going to assist,” he said looking at Kisa and watching her nod before turning back to Pepper. “I won’t be back in the office until this afternoon. I have an important meeting at 11 and I don’t know how long it will take. She’s going to be with me.”

“Alright,” Pepper nodded, once again giving them both a suspicious look. Since when did Tony allow his assistants to help deal with Avengers’ stuff? She could only assume the meeting he mentioned pertained to The Avengers, because any meetings for SI came to her first.

She watched as Tony came from behind his desk and nodded Kisa towards the door. She figured she’d find out later just what exactly was going on. “Let me know if you need anything,” she called out to them as they exited.

“I always do,” he grinned as he looked back at her.

Pepper frowned as they disappeared from view.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~

The moment the elevator doors closed behind them Tony turned to look at the woman beside him.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~
She really was short. The top of her head just barely reached his shoulders.

“I know where I know you from now,” he said to her and watched her turn to focus her unusual eyes on him. “Question is; who are you?”

“Best answer for now, is that I’m a friend. Anything else will have to wait.”

“Why?”

“You do not have time right now. You must stay focused.”

Tony frowned at her reply as she turned to stare at the elevator doors as if she were seeing right through them. Her demeanor hadn’t visibly changed from what he could see, but somehow he got the distinct impression that she was suddenly on edge.

“Do you have the suit with you, Anthony?”

Now he was certain she was the woman who was in his penthouse the other day. The way she said his name was a dead giveaway. Suddenly it dawned on him what she’d just asked.

He blinked. “No,” he said looking from her to the closed doors and back again. “I have my gauntlet though. Why? Is there a problem?”

“Maybe,” she frowned. “It is very difficult to sense, there are so many out there. Be on your guard, but do not worry.”

“I never worry.”

“Yes, you do,” she eyed him as the doors opened. “Come on.”

Tony arched a brow at her, but followed her off the elevator anyway. He sighed at the large crowd of press he could see outside the tower doors and immediately put on his public face. Ready to get this over with, he quickly stepped outside into the snapping cameras and noise, Kisa two steps behind him, and raised his arms for quiet.

“Hello everyone, thank you for coming,” he began as soon as it was quiet enough, smile firmly in place. “I know I promised you all an update on The Avengers, but unfortunately it’s still a bit too soon for any changes. The members who have recently returned are currently taking some time to spend with their families and friends and have asked that you all give them some time to weigh their options on signing the Accords. I think we can all agree that’s fair, right?”

“Does this mean that Captain America is considering returning to the Avengers?” yelled out one reporter.

“If Captain America does return will he retake his leadership of The Avengers? And if he does, where will that leave Iron Man?”

“Is Captain America not willing to work with Iron Man? Is that why he’s taking his time in coming back to The Avengers?” yelled out another obnoxious reporter, this one from the Daily Times.

“Tony, there are rumors you plan to retire Iron Man if the Captain returns, is that true?” called out Christine Everhart and Tony had to literally fight to not roll his eyes; he didn’t have his glasses with him.
“Ms. Everhart, you’re looking lovely as always,” he smiled, lying through his teeth. She was a good looking woman, but her personality turned everything good about her ugly. And she didn’t hold a candle to his new assistant. “I promise, if and when I ever decide to retire Iron Man you will be one of the first hundred people I tell.”

The smug smile fell immediately from her face while his smile grew wider.

“Any-” he broke off as something pinged and sparked off one of the microphones on the podium in front of him. He immediately flinched backwards then dropped to the ground as he was suddenly pulled down.

He turned his head to see unusual lavender eyes staring back at him. She was much stronger than her petite stature made her look, he noted.

“Stay down, Anthony,” she said as the noise grew and she stuck her head out from behind the wooden podium to check before looking back at him. “There is a man in a very ugly cloak shooting at you from across the street. Do not move. I will handle it and be right back.”

“You?” he asked as she moved to stand.

She arched a well sculpted brow at him then. “Yes.”

Just then many bullets started raining down on them from multiple directions. Pandemonium broke out as Kisa immediately dropped back to the ground beside him while simultaneously throwing one hand out in front of her to shove the podium out of the way and the other straight up in the air above them, a bright shield forming around them.

Tony’s eyes widened as he brought one of his own hands up, gauntlet in place. He noticed that most of the press had either ran away or hid as the area in front of them was practically clear now.

“Now,” Kisa began quietly, producing a long blade from God knows where, “I am pissed.”

Tony turned to look at her then and gasped. He’d been inspecting the bright shield she’d somehow produced to make sure it was still keeping out the bullets that were still reigning down on them now that they were completely exposed.

Eyes that were once lavender were now glowing a bright blue while a symbol that looked something like an angel had formed on Kisa’s forehead.

“Who are you?”

“I am your protector, Anthony Stark,” she replied and stood, the shield expanding with her movement. “And they are about to learn what that means.”
Oh God... please don't kill me. I promise it will get better soon. Tony needed this breaking point so he could see where he believes his limits are and overcome them. He's stronger than he thinks, but he has to hit bottom first to see it.

...Yeah... you're all gonna kill me, aren't you. *goes and hides*

---

Steve tried to suppress his sigh as he handed Sharon a bottle of water and sat down on the couch beside her, making sure to leave a good few inches of space between them. He watched as she took the bottle from him, but frowned when she only sat the bottle on the table instead of opening it. When she immediately picked it back up again he figured she asked for it more as a way to have something to do with her hands than out of any real need for something to drink.

“What was that about with you and Tony?” he asked, equal parts curious and a bid to give himself more time to figure out just what to say to her.

Sharon looked over at him then, an expression on her face he couldn’t quite decipher. For some reason he got the feeling she knew what he was going to say to her and was about to push him to say it, but after another moment of staring she just shrugged and looked down at the water bottle she was nervously rolling between her hands.

“It’s a long story,” she replied, not really wanting to talk about it. It wasn’t a time of her life she was proud of. “Let’s just say that not long after I started at S.H.I.E.L.D I didn’t take seeing and hearing about my aunt and all her accomplishments too well. I already knew about them, of course, I grew up hearing the stories from my own mother, but I guess I didn’t realize how inadequate I felt until I was here in the midst of it all. I started resenting her and took my anger out on her. I said some pretty hurtful things, but eventually apologized for it. I didn’t know at the time that Aunt Peggy was already ill – I didn’t see the signs. Tony did. And even though Aunt Peggy forgave me for my behavior and the things I said, Tony never has.”

Steve nods and looks away from her. Part of him is slightly upset on Peggy’s behalf and agrees with Tony, while another part of him knows he doesn’t know the whole situation and can’t really judge. Not that he was trying to judge.

“It’s water under the bridge now,” she shrugged after a moment and stood, pacing away from him towards the kitchen. “I really don’t blame him for hating me. I just hope he’ll forgive me one day, because sometimes I actually miss him being around. He helped me out a lot when I first moved here.”

“Sounds like Tony,” Steve nodded. This was hard for him; he’d never actually had to tell someone that he didn’t want to be with them before. Usually it was him being the one let down. Before the serum no gal ever really paid him much attention, especially with Bucky always beside him or
nearby. Usually when any gal wanted to talk to him it was to ask him about Bucky…. He’d eventually gotten used to it. No woman wanted to waste time on a man smaller than them and with one foot in the grave – according to all his doctors anyway.

After the serum he was too busy trying to decipher if it was really *him* they wanted or just what the serum had made him into on the outside. He was still Steve Rogers, son of Sarah and Johnathan Rogers, and no super soldier serum was going to change that. Peggy was the only gal who had shown any interest in him prior to his transformation and after. So it was really no surprise that he kind of gravitated to her like a moth to a flame. In the end, she always saw *Steve* first.

And men… well, any men he’d had an attraction to back then was only ever physical. Bucky was the closest guy to him and while he knew what some people thought and said behind their backs, thinking that Bucky and he didn’t hear or know, it had never been that way between them. Bucky had become like a brother to him so quickly, and vice versa, that it never even occurred to them to think something else about the other.

Now here he was, having to turn down a gal for the first time, a gal he truly liked and respected in all other ways and, of course, it was made more difficult because he’d made the mistake of kissing her months ago and giving her the impression that something could – *would* – happen between them.

“Steve what’s going on?” asked Sharon with a sigh as she looked at him, trying to catch his eye, but was proving to be impossible since he refused to return her gaze. “I can see there’s something you want to say. You almost physically flinched when you first saw me – which I’d thought would be a nice surprise, but obviously I was wrong – and after, you’ve barely looked at me the entire time I’ve been here. So, I’m asking you now; what’s going on? Do you want to break up with me?”

Steve did flinch then as his eye’s shot up to meet hers.

“Oh,” she breathed, eyes wide as she studied the mix of horror and shock on his face. “Maybe I’ve jumped the gun here… All this time I’ve been thinking we’re dating – after all you kissed me and said it was *late* – but from the look on your face that’s not what you’ve been thinking at all.”

Sharon shuck her head as she began to pace, not knowing how to feel right now. There was a large part of her that felt completely numb, but there was another part, a much smaller part, that wasn’t surprised at all. Some part of her had known what they had tried starting was over the moment she saw him again upstairs. She just really needed him to say it now.

“What have you been thinking, Steve? Or have you been thinking of me, *us*, at all?”

Steve sighed and bowed his head. Why was this so *hard*? Why couldn’t he just be honest with her? He hated seeing that look on her face, but he knew it would be even worse for him to give her false hope… either way he was going to hurt her and he really didn’t want to do that.

“Just say it, Steve,” she sighed, crossing her arms. “It’s written all over your face anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” he breathed out, lifting his head and finally meeting her gaze. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Why – why did you kiss me if you didn’t mean it?”

“I did mean it at the time,” he replied with a shake of his head as he added, “At least I think I did. I don’t know anymore. I just… I was attracted to you and I wasn’t sure if I was going to live
through what was coming and I just wanted to believe there was still something *good* in my life that I hadn’t broken. And then there you were, risking everything to help us, to bring me my shield… I don’t know. I just felt that if I didn’t do it then – kiss you – I never would. I didn’t think that feeling that way should have told me that kissing you wasn’t really what I wanted at all.”

“Yeah. Kissing someone shouldn’t be something you do in a desperate bid to feel alive, or something, it should be done because you *want* to kiss that person and keep kissing them, life or death.”

“I know,” he nodded. “I’m really sorry, Sharon. I never meant to put you through this.”

“Did you ever want me at all?”

“At one point, yes, a little,” he told her truthfully. But not wanting to give her false hope he knew he needed to tell her everything. “But there was always something else more important to do and I soon gave up the idea. Even when Natasha was pushing me to call you to take you out for coffee, I had already decided not to. I can’t really explain why… I just didn’t want to enough.” The fact he didn’t even give her a second thought the entire time he was in Wakanda was a complete giveaway. He just didn’t feel that way about her.

There was always someone else on his mind. Even before Wakanda.

Sharon nodded then. “Okay. Thank you for at least being honest with me.”

He wanted to tell her that he still wanted them to be friends, but he knew that would be a very bad move to make right now. Steve would just have to wait; time would tell if they could get passed this and be friends.

“Is it someone else?” she finally asked the question she’d been wanting to ask since he’d brought her to his floor.

“I-“

Steve was interrupted when the TV on the wall suddenly popped on. *Saved by the bell*, he thought as he immediately turned to see what was going on than froze as he saw the news coverage that appeared to be happening live.

A bunch of people in dark cloaks were shooting at what looked like the front of the Tower. He opened his mouth to ask FRIDAY what was going on when suddenly the empty podium holding the microphone was knocked over and there was Tony, huddled down with some kid beside him.

There was an audible gasp behind him.

“Tony…” Steve breathed then turned and immediately started running for the doors and then the stairs. His heart was in his throat as he raced for the common floor.

“STEVE!” yelled Sharon, running behind him. “Wait. You can’t go out there!”

Like hell he can’t, he thought as he burst through the stairwell door and made for the living room. He wasn’t at all surprised to see that everyone was there already.

“You guys see the news?”

“Yeah, I was just asking FRIDAY to tell you,” said Sam, his eyes never leaving the large television screen. “What are we going to do? You know we can’t go out there; we’re not Avengers.”
“Who gives a shit if we’re not Avengers?” said Steve as he turned, heading for the launch patio doors. “Tony needs help. I’m not just gonna sit here and watch. He doesn’t even have the suit with him. Someone wants to stop me? Let them try.”

Thor turned to look at Natasha, who was also heading for the doors right behind Steve. “Lady Natasha? Would you care for a lift?”

Natasha stopped to eye him for a moment before giving a slight nod and a smile. “That would be great, thank you.”

“Of course,” he said with a grin, following her outside before slinging a strong arm around her waist and spinning Mjolnir with the other hand. “Let us go help friend Tony,” he cried as they shot into the air.

“I could have used a lift, you know…” muttered Steve as he watched them take off.

“Vision has already gone to help,” said Bruce as he stopped beside Steve near the edge of the patio. “Guess I’ll see you down there, Captain,” he grinned then leaped off the building, transforming into the Hulk mid-fall.

“Are you sure about this, Cap?” asked Clint from behind him by the doors.

Steve sacrificed one moment to look over his shoulder at him and nodded. “Never been surer,” he replied then turned and swan dived off the edge.

~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~

“Twenty-two to two,” nodded Kisa as she pulled out a second blade from thin air, it seemed. “I like these odds. Stay inside the shield, Anthony.”

She watched as a bunch of people in cloaks with machine guns quickly surrounded them, pointing their guns at them from all sides. The shooting had halted though. She guessed they’d finally realized they were only wasting ammo.

“I can’t help from in here,” said Tony as he finally stood and looked around. He looked behind him and saw his security guard for the tower starting to make his way outside and quickly waved the man back. Mike was a father of three and there was nothing he could do in this situation, but get himself killed. It was just a matter of time before Natasha and Vision showed, he knew, they just needed to hold out until then.

“Of course you can,” replied Kisa as she stepped outside of the shield. Suddenly a bright light flared around her and he had to avert his eyes or go blind. When he was able to look back he saw her clothing had changed. Instead of the blazer, pencil skirt and heels she’d been wearing a moment ago, she now had on a long, hooded cloak with no sleeves. Her arms had some type of ribbon or bandage lacing up her arms with the sheaths for the long blades in her hands attached. Her thick hair was now pulled back into a long ponytail and the symbol he’d seen appear on her forehead was drawn on the back of her cloak. It was all a kind of a shimmery white color with the ribbons and the mark on her back done in the same lavender shade of her eyes. He couldn’t see anything else as her back was to him.

“It’s a shield, Anthony, not a prison,” she said glancing over her shoulder at him. “It does no good if it hinders you from attacking.”

“Stark has children protecting him, now?” said one of the men in front of her, drawing Kisa’s attention. “Get out of the way, little girl, or die with him.”
Kisa arched a brow and narrowed her eyes. She figured he must be their leader. She grinned as she flipped her blades to the outside of her arms so that the sharp side was facing out and the point up. “He is mine to protect,” was her only warning before she moved.

Tony eyes widened as he watched her dart across the space between her and the man who spoke. In a quick move he could barely follow she’d dropped to a crouch, spun and cut out the guys knees. When the man screamed and dropped his weapon as he fell, she’d stood quickly and cut his throat on the way down.

It took barely four seconds, he thought with a blink and she was already off to her next target. As the bullets started flying again, he started shooting his gauntlet, trying to take out anyone who was aiming at Kisa.

He idly wondered how a sparring match between her and Natasha would go.

Kisa spun and darted through the group, moving from target to target as she dodged bullets. Tony whistled in appreciation when she found herself surrounded by four and all she did was bend backwards, arms crossed over her head and cut the one down behind her then she did some kind of spinning dance move that caused the two on either side of her to shoot each other before slicing the last one across the chest.

With a twist, Kisa threw one of her blades through the air at a man who’d started shooting towards the sky. Just then she noticed Anthony’s friend, the one with the red face, had arrived and was shooting people with his lasers on the other side of Tony. Kisa smiled when three bolts of lightning took out three more of the cloak figures just as a redheaded woman dropped down in the middle of them and started shooting.

“Glad you guys could join us,” said Tony from inside the shield as he shot a person trying to sneak up on Thor when he landed.

“Tony, you definitely know how to keep a girl entertained,” replied Natasha. “Who’s she?” she asked, nodding towards Kisa, who had walked away to retrieve the blade she’d thrown that was still imbedded in the dead guys neck.

“She’s my new assistant,” he smiled at the arched brow Natasha gave him. “I’ll explain later.”

“Hmm,” said Natasha as she flipped backwards to keep from being shot then shot the man who’d tried.

When the ground suddenly shook followed closely by a loud roar, both Natasha and Kisa spun around, weapons up, to see two cloak figures shaking before the Hulk. After a moment both figures decided to make a run for it only to be grabbed from behind and tossed through the air to land on two parked cars before rolling off and falling to the ground, completely still.

Kisa suddenly did a 180-turn and grabbed the wrist of the guy trying to sneak up behind her. She continued turning to him and used her other arm to elbow the man in the gut before punching him in the face then twisting back out and taking his gun in the process.

She aimed the weapon at the man’s face, but paused when the other’s started talking again.

“What the hell is he doing?” said Natasha, looking to the sky. “He can’t land that.”

“He is going too fast,” said Thor from beside her, preparing to take off.

“STEVE!” yelled Tony, panic in his voice as he stepped outside the shield.
Kisa shot the man without even looking as she turned her attention to Anthony and then the sky. All she could hear was the panic in Anthony’s voice and knew she had to do something or the man falling was going to die. She knew the captain was important to Tony, so she quickly dropped the gun and lifted both hands to the sky, commanding the wind to do her bidding.

Tony and the others all watched as suddenly the wind started blowing hard and wrapping around Steve like a funnel. It flipped the captain in the air as it caught him and slowed his descent.

“How…” he trailed off as Natasha tapped him on the shoulder then directed his gaze toward Kisa. Her eyes were glowing bright blue again and her hands were lifted towards where Steve was falling.

“He is heavier than he looks,” stated Kisa with a frown as she guided the soldier to the ground; releasing him when he was about three feet from landing.

Steve landed on the ground with a roll and immediately headed for Tony and the others. He sent a silent prayer of thanks to God for Thor catching him, because he’d been half way down when he’d realized there was nothing near for him to catch a hold of nor an Iron Man to come catch him. He had no idea Thor could do that with the wind though, he thought idly as he gave a fleeing figure in a dark cloak a hard right punch to the jaw. He gave the man a quick glance to make sure he was out cold before continuing towards the others.

Slowly, Kisa lowered her arms as the blue light from her eyes receded and looked around her, noting that all the cloak figures were either dead or unconscious. She then turned to see Tony and the rest staring at her.

“What?”

“You have yourself a powerful guardian, Tony Stark,” boomed Thor with a wide grin. “Your destiny must be very bright, indeed.”

“What?” asked Tony, turning to look at the god.

“Has she not told you?” he asked, looking between Kisa and him. “She is of the Divine Guard and you are her Ward. They are formidable warriors and have been protecting others for ages, though it is not often one so strong are given to a single Ward. Your destiny must be very great.”

“We didn’t get that far,” breathed Tony, slightly in shock. Absently he noted Steve joining them as he turned to look at Kisa. “That’s what you meant by you being my protector?”

“Yes,” she confirmed then focused her gaze on Steve when he stopped in front of Tony. “You are late.”

“These guys are not HYDRA,” said Natasha, thinking that any more discussion about Tony’s protector should be done where outsiders couldn’t overhear.

“They are not,” agreed Kisa, looking at the redhead. “That one over there, the two the Hulk threw and the one the Captain hit are still alive if you are looking to ask them questions.”

Steve raised his brows at the unknown woman, but didn’t reply to her accusation. “You alright, Tony?”

“Peachy, Cap,” replied Tony, rubbing a hand over his chest. “Is Hill still here?”

“Right here, Tony,” replied Maria as she came down the steps outside the tower; Sharon right
behind her. “I’ve already contacted Fury, but he was already aware and has a team in route.” She turned to look at Kisa then. “I’ve never seen anyone move the way you do, except, possibly, Romanov. Which four did you say were alive?”

Kisa pointed to the man whose chest she’d slashed when they’d tried surrounding her and then the two still knocked out on the ground by two heavily dented cars. Lastly, she pointed out the one a small distance away, a frown marring her features. “They were after Anthony,” she told her as she slipped her blades back into their sheaths on her arms. “Maybe you can find out why, yes?”

“Tony!” screamed out Pepper as she came flying out the building and down the stairs towards the engineer.

Both women turned with everyone else at the outburst and they all suppressed a smile as Pepper began checking Tony over for injuries.

“I’m fine, Pep, honest,” replied Tony as he wrapped an arm around her waist to keep her still. “I stayed inside my shield like a good little engineer.”

“Good,” said Pepper with a sigh after she’d confirmed he had no injuries. She’d learned long ago she couldn’t trust Tony’s assessment of his own health. She turned to look at Kisa then. “You have some explaining to do; no normal assistant fights like that. But thank you for protecting him.”

“It’s why I’m here,” Kisa said and nodded, accepting her gratitude. “And I will remain his assistant as I promised.”

“The President will want to talk to you guys,” said Sharon, speaking for the first time. “None of you, except Agent Romanov and Vision, have signed the Accords.”

Everyone exchanged knowing looks as Tony sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He could suddenly feel a headache coming on.

“You all need to read your documents better; this situation does not apply,” said Kisa as she crossed her arms under her chest.

Tony blinked then as he looked up at her. “She’s right. This was not an attack on the city or state or against the country; it was a personal attack against me. No innocent bystanders were hurt – not even one member of the press – and the only property damage that’s not my property are those two cars. The Accords don’t have any rules for this.” He tilted his head at Kisa in curiosity. “You’ve read The Accords?”

“I have,” she nodded. “It has merit. Your people are trying to prevent more innocents from dying needlessly. It’s a noble cause. They are aware you cannot always save everyone, but they at least want to try. I can appreciate that.”

“I like her,” said Bruce with a small grin then added, “and sorry about those cars.” He’d reverted back to himself so now stood in nothing but purple spandex and bare feet. He crossed his arms over his chest as he turned to head inside. “I’m going to go put some clothes on now.”

Natasha started to follow him, calling over her shoulder. “I’ll grab Rhodey and meet you guys in Tony’s shop. We’re late on finding out what FRIDAY has discovered.”

“Aye,” agreed Thor with a nod as he shot into the air; obviously deciding to return the same way he came.
“What was that about?” asked Steve, looking at Tony. He’d been so worried about the other man and he wasn’t ready to let him out of his sight yet.

“Nothing to concern yourself about, Cap,” replied Tony as he watched four black SUVs and a large truck pull up. He watched as Maria approached them and immediately started handing out orders. He guessed they were the clean-up crew as he watched them restrain and load the four men Kisa indicated earlier into three of the SUVs.

“Can we not do this right now, Tony? Please?” sighed Steve, suddenly feeling very exhausted. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

Tony eyed him for a moment, contemplative, then glanced at Sharon before giving a slight nod and turning to go back inside, pulling Pepper (who was busy glaring at Steve) along with him, as he silently commanded the gauntlet back into the band around his wrist. “Come on.”

Kisa gave both him and Sharon a look before she turned to follow Tony with Vision beside her.

Steve sighed, not missing the strange look from unusual eyes before he nodded to Sharon. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

She nodded as she watched him. “Sure. I think I have my answer now, but we can talk if you want.”

Steve gave her a questioning look as he started following Tony and the others inside.

“Don’t worry about it,” she waved him off and shook her head. Obviously, even a super soldier could still be an idiot. “Go ahead. We’ll talk later.”

Steve gave her one last questioning glance before continuing on. Luckily Tony had to stop and talk to Pepper and the guard to get contractors in to clean up all the broken glass from the bullets that hit the tower and, therefore, was able to catch up to everyone.

“Finish kissing her goodbye, Rogers?” asked Tony as he turned to look at Steve suddenly. Steve opened his mouth to reply, but Tony raised a hand to stop him before he could speak. “No, don’t answer that. I don’t really care. Let’s go.”

Steve tilted his head in wonder as he watched him walk away, towards the elevators. He aimed a questioning glance at Pepper, but her face was like stone as she stared back at him. She was obviously mad at him, too. Not that he didn’t expect it. Even though she and Tony were no longer dating they were obviously still very good friends and she, still, very loyal.

But for a moment there, he couldn’t help thinking Tony seemed jealous.

But what reason could Tony have to be jealous of him?? Unless… it wasn’t him Tony was jealous of…

“You coming, Rogers?” called out Tony then, breaking him out of his thoughts. “Or you just going to keep standing there staring into space like that?”

Steve rolled his eyes and quickly moved towards them and the elevators. “I was not staring into space, I was thinking.”

“Do tell,” said Tony as he waited for Steve to step on the elevator before he directed FRIDAY to take them to his work shop. “Solve the mystery of life?”
“Not of life – I’ll leave that one to people smarter than me - but it definitely is a mystery,” agreed Steve as he shook his head. “And I’m not close to solving it.”

Some mysteries are not meant to be solved, Captain,” spoke Vision, as if parting great wisdom. “Sometimes they just need to be appreciated.”

Kisa smirked, but made sure not to look directly at the Captain, who was standing on her other side. When the elevator stopped she gently grabbed Anthony’s hand (who, surprisingly, didn’t flinch from her touching his hand) and gave it a gentle pull; silently telling him to wait.

“Tell them we’ll be along in a moment, Vision, would you?” asked Tony once the doors had opened completely and Vision and Steve had stepped out. Vision nodded in agreement before continuing on and Steve followed with a puzzled frown on his face after giving both Tony and Kisa questioning looks; not missing the fact they were holding hands.

Tony, busy looking at Kisa in question, completely missed the look on Steve’s face, but Kisa had seen it as she was still facing forward. She squeezed Anthony’s hand in gratitude before letting go as she waited silently for the elevator doors to shut.

“Hold the elevator, Fry,” said Tony as he looked down at Kisa, eyebrows raised and flexing his fingers. For some reason he didn’t feel the same way with her as he usually felt when someone touched his hand. “What’s going on?”

Kisa waited to be sure the others had gone before speaking. “He jumped for you.”

“What?”

“The Captain,” she clarified as she finally turned and tilted her head back to look directly at him. “You should know he jumped for you.”

“Not for me,” he shook his head. “You’ll soon learn he does that. It’s annoying, but what can you do,” he added with a shrug, not really asking a question.

“That may be so in the past, but just now the captain jumped off that building not because he was in the middle of some battle, but because he believed you needed help. He jumped for you. He did that with no thought to his own safety and believing he’d get in trouble for it later.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I can see that he is important to you no matter how much you try to deny it to yourself.” She waited a few seconds before adding her ace. “You yelled his name.”

“What?” asked Tony, eyes wide with a mixture of shock and horror. He’d been trying not to let the fact Steve had come to help him when he was being attacked make him feel any type of way at all – or at least not show it – and now not only was Kisa pointing out what he didn’t want to think about she was also telling him that maybe the others had possibly seen or heard his concern for Steve.

“When he was falling you yelled out for him. You can pretend whatever you like, Anthony, but I know he is important to you or else his betrayal would not hurt you so much. Sooner or later you are going to have to decide to forgive him or not. You will never move pass this until you do.”

“Who are you?”

“You know who I am, Anthony,” she declared with a smile as she looked up at him. “You may
not have seen or heard me until recently, but you have felt me beside you all your life. I have always been here.”

There was something about her that was familiar, he thought as he regarded her silently. He’d thought it was her voice at first, but there was no denying that he didn’t react to her the way he usually did when around new people. Tony just wasn’t one to trust so easily or quickly, but he’d never had any reservations about her from the moment she walked into his office not even an hour ago.

Tony felt as relaxed with her as he did with Rhodey or Pepper… which didn’t make any sense to him.

“Okay, let’s say that’s all true, that you’ve been here all this time…” he nodded, crossing his arms, “why haven’t I seen you before now?”

Kisa sighed then. She knew that he would ask her sooner or later… she’d hoped it would be later. “Never be seen. Always protect,” she breathed out with a frown. “That is one of the cardinal rules of the Divine Guard. Long ago humans proved to be… unreasonable when they knew they had someone who would do anything to protect them. So many senseless deaths happened or almost happened that the rule was passed that we would only ever work from the shadows. I’ve never liked the rule and you are reckless, regardless, but it was not my choice to make.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at the reckless comment, but couldn’t really deny it so he, grudgingly, let it pass. With slip-ins like that, she was going to fit in fine. And if he was honest, he could see the necessity of such a rule. More people would do crazy things if they knew they had some power protecting them. “So why are you showing yourself now?”

“Because you needed me to,” she said turning away and looking at the closed elevator doors before adding. “And maybe I needed me to, as well.”

Tony watched her for a moment then turned to look at the doors as well. He didn’t know what to think. So much had happened in his life… if she had been there for all of it why didn’t she show herself before now? And how much did she really see? Obviously, there was still more to discuss, more he needed to know, but he knew now wasn’t the right time.

“Come on, open these doors,” she gestured to the closed elevator. “Your friends are waiting for us.”

“FRIDAY?” he called out, a silent request in his voice.

“Of course, boss.”

Kisa smiled up at him then, a dimple forming in her left cheek. “You were always so very brilliant, Anthony. It was often a joy to watch you grow in all ways.”

Tony blinked and tried not to fidget. He could actually hear the pride in her voice just then. And it was aimed at him. She actually really meant that. He was use to people pouring over him with praise, but most of them only bothered to say it to see what it would get them. They never really meant the awe they were trying to convey, but Kisa did.

Because she’d been there to see it grow. To see him grow.

“I… You don’t have to say that,” he said looking down and stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“You’re right, I don’t have to,” she said, giving him a thoughtful look as her smile fell. “Come.”
He looked up then, seeing the doors were open, and following her out. She didn’t take it back, he thought as he led her to his workshop. The sliding glass doors were already open and he saw everyone was, indeed, waiting for them. Steve was the first to notice their arrival and turned, giving them a questioning look.

“Everything alright, Tony?” Steve asked, gaze flicking to Kisa, beside him, and back.

Tony looked at him in question, but nodded before focusing on everyone else. “Sorry for the delay; couldn’t be avoided though,” he said to them with a slight shrug and watched them all either nod or roll their eyes in response. “Okay, FRIDAY, let me see wha-”

“Tony Stark.”

Tony frowned at the interruption then noticed the man with the red cape that he hadn’t noticed at first because he was sitting on one of Tony’s stools behind the others and, therefore, blocked from Tony’s sight.

“You.”

“Wasn’t I invited?” the man replied, faking affronted. “I distinctly remember receiving a letter…”

“You sent him a letter?” asked Rhodey in pure disbelief.

“I wrote him a letter I didn’t send him one,” replied Tony, rolling his eyes. “There’s a big difference. “ He turned his attention back to Strange. “Stop confusing my honey-bear. You’re going to have him thinking I’m dying again and that’s not good for anybody.”

“Sending a letter through the mail won’t kill you,” replied Strange with a roll of his eyes.

“Yes, it will,” spoke Tony, Rhodey, Natasha, Bruce, Steve and Kisa in unison while Vision just arched an eyebrow and Thor grinned.

Tony looked taken aback for a moment before breaking out into a big grin. “See,” he said, one step short of sticking his tongue out like a child.

Stephen Strange pinched his nose and prayed for patience before stepping forward and stopping just in front of Tony, leaving only about an inch of space. “Why am I here, Tony?”

Steve stiffened, uncomfortable with how close to Tony the unknown man was standing, but he remained still as he sensed no bad vibes from Tony in response to the other man’s aggression. In fact, Tony was grinning from cheek to cheek, whiskey eyes sparkling with suppressed mirth as he stared back at said man.

Rhodey and Natasha exchanged identical looks as they watched Strange be riled by Tony and Steve’s reaction to it.

Tony, oblivious to the others for a moment, tried not to laugh in Strange’s face as he enjoyed getting just a little of his own back on the sorcerer. “I told you my friend needed help finding his father and that we needed to do it fast. I figured you may be able to help since it seems there may be some magic in play here.”

“And who is your friend?” asked Strange, eyes flicking to Kisa, who returned his gaze, unflinchingly.

“Not her,” said Tony, seeing where his gaze had gone. “Him.”
Strange flicked his gaze back to Tony before turning around to follow where the billionaire was looking. His eyes widened in surprise for a moment as he recognized the power signature before him.

“Thor of Asgard, son of Odin,” stated Strange as he nodded at the huge blonde. “I know who you are. Your adopted brother, Loki, is on my list. Wait. He said your father is missing. Do you mean King Odin?”

“I have no other father,” frowned Thor, unsure how the sorcerer before him could be of help to him, but open to the possibility.

“And you have reason to believe he is here on Earth?” asked Strange, taking no offense from Thor’s response.

“Aye, I do.”

“Hm. Well, that would explain your brother’s presence…” he said thoughtfully,

“You know where Loki is hiding?” asked Thor, stepping forward.

“Of course,” he waved, not really paying attention to the blonde. “I said he was on my list. After what he did to New York I make sure to know whenever your brother decides to visit… Odd, I have not sensed any other Asgardians here, other than the ones who regularly come through and your father is not one of them. I may have an idea where to look though.”

Strange turned to look at Tony then.

“Didn’t you say something about a list?”

Tony crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Not to you. I see you’ve been making use of that Mirror dimension you mentioned once.”

Stephen just smiled in reply.

Tony frowned, not at all liking the idea of being spied on. “FRIDAY, give me what you got.”

“Of course, boss.” Tony grinned at her dry tone. “In the specified search area there are exactly 42 patients who meet the specified criteria. I did not add any unknowns who have been under medical care for five consecutive years or longer.”

“That’s a lot of bodies to check…” said Bruce with a frown as everyone nodded in agreement.

“How many of those are located in a state that also has a known S.H.I.E.L.D office?”

“There are eleven in known S.H.I.E.L.D locations, boss.”

“Ah, I see what you have been thinking,” said Strange suddenly, nodding at Tony in approval. “It’s actually a very good thought, considering….” He turned to look up at the ceiling then. “FRIDAY was it? Tell me, are any of those eleven located at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda?”

Tony, Natasha, Rhodey, Steve and Bruce all turned to stare at the sorcerer in a strange mix of shock and dread.

“Yes, Doctor Strange. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” replied FRIDAY, completely oblivious to the change in atmosphere. “There are exactly three patients residing at the specified
“Ah, thank you madam,” smiled Strange, also not recognizing the change around him. “One of them will be your missing King,” he said with a flourish as he turned to look at the others and finally noticing the looks on most of their faces. “What?”

“Is there a problem?” asked Thor, looking around at his friends with obvious concern. “Is this not good news? Three is much better than 42.”

“Ah yeah, Thor, buddy, it is better. It’s just…” Tony began then trailed off with a shake of his head and turned to look at Strange. “Are you sure one of those three is the one?”

“Reasonably,” he shrugged.

“I need more than reasonably, Strange. We’re talking about infiltrating one of the US Army’s top military hospitals here. That’s going to take a lot more than magic,” stated Tony with more than a slight amount of irritation as an image of the hospital in question popped up on a halo-screen in front of everyone.

“I see,” he nodded, eyeing the image in front of them. “I will need to get a closer look to be positive which one is King Odin, but I would bet my cloak that one of them is him. That is the place Loki has been spending quite a bit of time. He may have been hiding the king from my sight, but he can never hide himself.”

“Loki…” breathed Thor with unconcealed anger.

“Okay, that’s good enough for me,” said Tony with a nod. “If we’re going to do this we need to do it as right as we can so no red flags go off. We don’t have time for red flags. I think we should keep this operation small and under the radar.”

“You definitely don’t want the US Military finding out you’re there and why,” agreed Rhodey with a nod. “I may still be a member, but I’m not blind to what they may try if they knew they had the King of Asgard in their hands.”

“Are you still a member?” asked Tony with an arched brow.

“We’ll know next week. I go before the Medical Board then.”

“What?” Tony turns to him fully in alarm. “I didn’t know this. You didn’t tell me this, why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Now!? Why didn’t you tell me before!?” asked Tony, getting loud. “I could have done something!”

“Done what, Tones?” sighed Rhodey as he stepped over towards his friend. As he looked into Tony’s wide eyes staring back at him, he knew exactly what the other man was thinking and shook his head. “See? That right there,” he pointed a finger at his face then, “is why I didn’t say anything before. What happened is not your fault and my braces are the best. I can walk and I can still pilot War Machine. I’m just not getting better fast enough for the Air Force. We both knew this was coming sooner or sooner. I’m okay with whatever they decide.”

“But I could make better-”
“I know you can, but like I said, the tech isn’t the problem,” he shrugged and then threw an arm around Tony’s neck, pulling him close. “I got this. The brass has always known where my loyalties lay first and you have more important things to worry about,” he nodded towards Thor and the rest.

Tony nodded in acknowledgement of the others, his eyes flicking their way before looking at his hands. He’d been hoping… well, it didn’t matter what he’d hoped. He should know by now his hopes don’t work anyway. “You don’t think they’ll… you know, because of me, right?”

Rhodey tilted his head as he regarded Tony silently for a moment. He wished they weren’t having this conversation in front of an audience, but it couldn’t be helped now. He knew Tony was worried the Air Force would decide to discharge him due to his friendship with the engineer, but honestly, Rhodey didn’t give a damn if they did. And it was a possibility they would.

“They can’t,” he replied honestly. Tony could read right through his lies so there was no use in trying. “But Tony, it doesn’t matter if they do or not and if they do I doubt it will be because of you. This is the Medical Board. They can only make a decision based off my medical information. The Brass has no say in this.”

“You mean they’re not supposed to have any say.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey grinned, dropping his arm from around him. “Come on, we need to find Thor’s father. Next week can wait.”

Tony watched him for a moment longer before nodding and looking at the others. He didn’t meet any of their eyes, but he could see the sympathy they were all aiming at them. “Nat you think you know someone who can get some creds made up for Strange, Thor and Bruce asap?”

Natasha nodded. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking Thor, under a different name, will walk into that hospital looking for his father that he learned from the local authorities might be there. Bruce will accompany him as their regular family doctor and Strange can follow unseen using that interesting cloak of his. John Does are usually reported to the authorities for missing persons to investigate. I’ll have FRIDAY do a search of their databases for a corresponding file to all three. Hopefully the good doctors of Walter Reed have done their due diligence.”

“I’m still not that kind of doctor,” sighed Bruce without any real inflection. He knew he was speaking to deaf ears.

“Or I can just take a peek and see which of the three is the one we want, if you can just provide me some room numbers…..” offered Strange with a shrug, a solemn look on his face. He was feeling a bit guilty for teasing Tony earlier after watching him with the Colonel. He knew how it felt to feel responsible for someone close to you being injured… and the overwhelming need to make it right. “I imagine that story you outlined would go over better if we were there looking for a specific patient.”

“Doe, John N. is located in room 1356. Doe, John O. is located in room 1358 and Doe, John P. is located in room 1360. All rooms are located on the third floor, right wing. Boss, you might find it of interest to note that Doe, John O. has shown no health changes in the entire four years and 62 days he has been under all-day care at this facility,” said FRIDAY without being prompted.

Bruce, Tony and Strange all exchanged identical looks at that last part.
“Now that is interesting,” nodded Tony. “And I don’t doubt others have found it interesting as well.”

“Indeed. He is under heavy monitoring.”

“Is there a camera feed, Fry?”

“There is a 24-hour video feed on him at all times, boss.”

Tony arched a brow at that. He’d have to hack the hospital’s databanks and find out where the videos from that feed were being sent. “Strange, I think you should start with that one. I have a feeling you won’t have to worry about the other two.”

“I think you’re right,” said Strange with a frown as he waved his hand and a portal spilling blue light opened suddenly. “Let us find out. Room 1358, correct? This shouldn’t take long,” he added and then stepped through the portal, which quickly shut behind him.

Everyone exchanged surprised looks except for Tony, Rhodey, Bruce and Kisa.

“So he is that Dr. Stephen Strange,” said Bruce, nodding. “His face is definitely too well known in the medical field to play their family doctor. You’ll have to tell me how you two met one day, Tony.”

Rhodey covered his grin with his hand, but he wasn’t fast enough to keep Tony from seeing it first.

“I’m going to remember you asked that, Brucie-bear,” replied Tony after giving Rhodey a good frown.

“I’m going to regret that aren’t I?” said Bruce, looking around at everyone with wide eyes. Kisa, Natasha and Rhodey all nodding and hiding smiles.

“Midgard has sorcerers now?” asked Thor in complete awe. He’d had no idea of this development.

“From what I’ve told it’s been going on for quite a while,” said Tony with a roll of his eyes. He’d take technology over magic any day.

“It has,” said Kisa with a nod. “Earth’s magical community, while formidable, has never been very large and has always kept itself pretty hidden. It has recently shown signs of growing much more powerful though with both the mutant and in-human populations growing exponentially.”

“Yes, something our government and the UN have yet to take into account when it comes to the Accords,” said Tony with a shrug. “Rhodey, Pepper and I have a bet on how long it’s going to take them to realize that. Pepper is going to lose if they don’t within the month; she has a lot more faith in the UN’s attention to detail than we do.”

“Where did he go?” spoke Steve for the first time; almost startling Tony who’d nearly forgotten he was there.

“Who? Strange?” asked Tony and Steve nodded as he crossed his arms. “Mirror dimension, I’m guessing. It’s exactly what it’s called; a place that’s a mirror of here. He can go anywhere that is here as long as he knows where he’s going; locks and walls don’t matter. So right now, he can go to that hospital room and see everything that is there without actually being there.”

“So that’s why he needed the room numbers?”
“Hmm,” nodded Tony as he eyed Steve. “He can go or see anywhere as long as he knows where to go.”

“Well I have a phone call to make,” said Natasha. “I should have those credentials for you in two hours. That should give us plenty of time to get this finished.”

“And while you do that I’ll get a lock on that camera and any video footage it has. I think I’d like to know who’s interested in our miracle patient,” said Tony. “We all meet back here in two hours?”

Everyone nodded as they started to head out.

“I thank you all, my friends. I do not know how I can ever repay you all for your great assistance. I think this moment calls for a celebratory tart of pop!”

Bruce grinned at the happy blonde. “You go right ahead, Thor. Have one for me, too. I’m going to see if I can get some of that beef stew Vision made last night.”

“Vision made a beef stew?” asked Tony, suddenly very hungry and noticing that the android in question had already left.

“I’ll call for you when it’s hot, Tony,” smiled Bruce as he turned to leave, Thor right behind him.

Natasha was having a silent conversation (looked more like a battle – that Steve was losing) with Steve before she suddenly turned to give Tony a significant look. She tilted her head towards Steve as she held Tony’s gaze for a moment before turning to smile at Kisa.

“Kisa was it?” at the other woman’s nod she continued. “How about I show you to the kitchen and you can get something to eat, too? I bet you haven’t had lunch yet either and it’s almost noon.”

Kisa eyes flicked so fast between the three that Tony would have missed it if he wasn’t watching her. He guessed in that split moment his guardian had caught on to Nat’s game. He waited to see her reaction, but he had a feeling it wouldn’t be bad considering their talk in the elevator not too long ago.

Kisa gave the redhead a big smile as she stepped forward to link her arm with Natasha’s and began walking them both out to the elevator. “That would be lovely! Do you, by chance, have peanut butter?”

“You’re going to have to explain to me the pretty woman with the eyes, Tones, but later. Right now, I’m going to follow her and Natasha because a man’s gotta eat,” said Rhodey before shooting Steve a warning frown. The man had dived off the tower for Tony; he’d give him this opportunity.

“Short answer is she’s my new assistant and I have plenty you can eat down here if you want to stay a while,” replied Tony with a smirk and mirth in his eyes.

“See, why you always have to make it weird?” said Rhodey, shaking his head to hide his smile as he began walking away to where the women were holding the elevator for him. Tony was okay to be left alone with Steve. “This is why I’m following the woman now.”

Tony grinned as he watched Rhodey walk away and get on the elevator. His eyes connected with all of theirs’ before the elevator doors closed and took them away. He took a deep breath then and looked over at Steve. The captain was still standing in the same spot Natasha had left him, looking confused and maybe a little lost.

For some reason both Natasha and Kisa thought this was a good time for him and Steve to talk.
What they saw that he didn’t, he didn’t know, but he also knew it wouldn’t be good for him to fight them on it.

Tony moved over to sit on the stool Strange had been using and waved his hand in the air to make the image of Walter Reed smaller and then brought it closer to himself. He laid his hands in the air as a virtual keyboard appeared in front of him. “Alright Fry, let’s find that camera.”

“Something on your mind, Cap?” he called out to Steve, breaking the soldier from his trance.

Steve jerked slightly at Tony’s words to him. He looked around, realizing that everyone had left and tried not to panic again. Natasha had made it pretty clear that she thought he and Tony needed to talk and that right now was the perfect time, but he didn’t really know what to say. He’d wanted so badly to get Tony alone again so they could talk, but now that he had it all he could do was stare and try not to show how nervous he was.

Did Tony even want to talk to him?

He looked over at the engineer then. Tony’s fingers were flying across the virtual keyboard as his eyes were trained on the data scrolling on the screen in front of him. He didn’t look to be paying Steve any attention, but he knew that was just a clever illusion. Tony was very good at multitasking when he wanted to be and he was sure that a good part of the engineer’s attention was zeroed in on him.

And he’d asked him a question. Oh.

“Umm… no,” said Steve, scrambling to recall the question; what was on his mind? Easier question would be what wasn’t on his mind. “Is Strange coming back?”

“Most likely in two hours,” Tony replied with a shrug. He hadn’t expected Strange to be what Steve wanted to talk about. “He’d have come back and told us if we were wrong by now, so something has probably caught his attention. Probably something dealing with magic.”

“You know him well, I see,” noted Steve with a frown as he looked away, eyes falling on Dum-E and U doing something with an extinguisher in the far corner.

“Not really,” he said, deciding to reply to the non-question as he eyed the captain, curiously, from the corner of his eye. There was something he couldn’t quite decipher in Steve’s voice. “But then how well can one really know anyone? We’ve only known each other a few months.”

Steve tried not to flinch at the subtle jab from Tony, but he knew he didn’t quite succeed when the brunet actually turned to look at him fully for a moment.

“So this is what you guys were talking about outside? Helping Thor find his father?” he asked, trying to change the subject. That was just a pit waiting to happen. “How does one lose a King anyway and why didn’t he tell me? I would have helped.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, stopping his typing so he could turn towards him. He knew FRIDAY would continue where he’d left off. “This is what we were doing and the answer to how that happens would be Loki. And I imagine Thor came to me and not you because he figured I had the resources to do it as he knows I do.”

Steve frowned. That made sense, actually. Going to Tony for something like this was the more logical action; even he’d wanted to do so when… His eyes widened then as he snapped his head around. His eyes met whiskey brown and he saw the same thought he’d come to sitting there in golden-brown pools.
“You know, I’d wondered back then why you’d never asked me. After HYDRA fell and I’d learned who’d pulled you out of that water I knew you’d want to find him and I waited for you. I’d even tracked Barnes to Canada and was ready to tell you and your birdy where to go,” he said, watching as Steve opened his mouth to speak, but after a long few seconds no words had come out. “But you never asked. I’d thought about just giving you the information anyway, but I’d decided you must have a reason for not wanting to ask me and I didn’t want to step over any boundaries,” he smiled then, but he knew it was mockery as it didn’t reach his eyes.

“So I tossed the information and told JARVIS to stop the search,” he shrugged and rolled his stool over to another table and picked up the new gauntlet he was working on. This one had the ability to form a large laser shield from the wrist. “You had your reasons for not trusting me, is what I thought, and I tried not to take it personal that you were completely okay with Sam’s help though. Lucky me, I had plenty of other things to keep me plenty busy with so many trying to kill me and all. So you know, I got over it.”

He stood then, not in the mood to be still, but kept his eyes focused on the gauntlet as he grabbed his lucky screwdriver and began to tinker. “I get it now though.”

“No you don’t,” said Steve with a shake of his head as he took a step closer to him, yet there was still a great deal of space between them. How could Tony understand it when Steve barely did? There had been so much going through Steve’s head back then that even now, thinking back on it, he couldn’t say all that had been in his mind.

“Sure, I do,” said Tony, his back to Steve. “That’s when you’d found out about Barnes and my parents right? Of course, you wouldn’t want me to help find their killer when I wasn’t aware of that little fact. That would be in poor taste, even for you, Cap.”

“That wasn’t it, Tony.”

“Hmm,” Tony nodded, but obviously didn’t believe him.

Steve could see his disbelief even from behind and his frustration with the other man and his attitude finally got the better of him and before he knew it he’d quickly closed the space between them and, grabbing Tony by his right fore-arm, spun the engineer around to face him. In his anger he completely missed how Tony violently flinched at his touch or how his hand had tightened into a fist around the screwdriver he held as Tony brought it up between them.

“I said that wasn’t why, Tony,” he stated in a hard voice. “At least not all of it.”

Tony just nodded, not really hearing him anymore. He’d immediately fallen into a mini panic attack when he’d felt and seen Steve looming over him. All his mind kept supplying him with was the image of Steve over him with his shield coming down to strike him down for good. He knew it wasn’t real, but Steve’s hard grip on him wasn’t helping him focus properly. He could feel himself beginning to shake as his fist tightened on the screwdriver in his hand. It was his only weapon to defend himself.

“Boss, your heart rate is escalating fast,” said FRIDAY suddenly and urgently. “Captain I will have to insist that you release him immediately or I will be forced to take necessary measures.”

A sudden chill ran through Steve at the edge in the A.I. voice, bringing him out of his angry haze. “What?” he said as he looked down at Tony and nearly tripping as he ripped himself away from him at the look of terror in the engineer’s eyes.

As soon as he let go, Tony fell to his knees, breathing hard and sweating. Steve went immediately
back to him then; dropping to his knees and gently grabbing Tony’s hands; they were freezing. He knew what a panic attack was when he saw one – he’d had plenty of his own, after all – and he knew you had to bring a person gently out of one or risk them losing consciousness.

“Captain, you will back up or-”

“I got this, FRIDAY, I promise you I won’t hurt him,” he said as he gently opened Tony’s empty hand – knowing not to try to take away what Tony perceived as a defense away from him at that moment – and placed the opened palm against his chest, right over his heart. “I will die before I hurt him, again…”

When the A.I. still remained quiet after a few more seconds, Steve figured she was giving him a chance.

“Tony, look at me. Come on, show me those beautiful brown eyes…” he urged and waited for Tony’s wide eyes to slowly meet his before continuing. “There we go. Beautiful. You’re having a panic attack, Tony. You need to calm down. Breathe with me,” he added as he gently patted the hand on his chest to get Tony’s attention there before placing his much warmer palm over the back of that hand.

Steve breathed in deeply and slowly let the breath out. He continued in this pattern, silently, for a couple of minutes until he saw Tony was mimicking him and was willingly looking him in the eyes. His eyes were slowly returning to normal size and Steve took that moment to take a chance and slowly brought his other hand up and pressed it to Tony’s chest, right where the arc reactor used to be. His hand covered the entire mark, completely and he felt Tony shiver for a moment. But, after a frozen second where he thought he’d be shoved away, Tony placed his fist that still held the screwdriver over top Steve’s hand and continued breathing with him.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” Steve whispered, trying to push away his sudden tears. This man, who meant so much to him, was frightened by his touch and Steve had only his self to blame. How did he let it get to this?

How could he fix it?

“I will never hurt you like that again, Tony,” he said urgently and soft as he stared the other man in his eyes, not bothering to try to hide his tears anymore. He wanted Tony to see how much he regretted what happened in Siberia and that he had never ever wanted to hurt Tony even back then.

Steve watched as Tony’s eyes flicked back and forth between his as he was trying to trust what he was saying against what, Steve knew, his mind was reminding him of. He’d used his strength against someone who was important to him and for the first time since he made the decision to take part in Project Rebirth, Steve wished he hadn’t.

And that was a revelation for him, because not even Peggy or Bucky had ever made him regret taking the serum, but he did for Tony. And that hurt even more because he was also thankful for the serum, because without it he’d never have met Tony.

Steve closed his eyes and leaned forward, gently placing his forehead against Tony’s and sucked in a deep breath, tears still rolling down his face. He could taste Tony’s breath on his and idly noted that he’d had the chance to get that coffee he’d been after; then he sucked in one more breath, just to taste him one more time.

“I promise you, Tony, not for anyone or anything will I ever use my strength against you again,” he whispered to him as he opened his eyes; sky blue meeting whiskey brown. “I will die for good
before I ever let that happen. You hear me?"

After a long moment Tony nodded against him, gently, as he turned the hand he had pressed against Steve’s chest around and laced their fingers together. Tears streaming down his own face as well.

“Steve…”

Tony stared at him through watery eyes, desperately wanting and trying to believe Steve, but not sure if he could. Not sure if he ever could, again, because Steve, alone, had the power to destroy Tony and he hadn’t even realized it until just now. He’d been betrayed so many times in the past and every time hurt more than the one before, but another betrayal from Steve would break him. He knew it with the same certainty that he knew he was a genius and the sun would rise tomorrow and that he didn’t have the courage to take that risk.

That thought was slowly killing Tony inside, because there was nothing more he wanted than the man kneeling in front of him as Tony knew now he was in love with Steve…

…

…

…

And he was afraid of him.
I'm sorry for the delay everyone. Mother's day and my mom's birthday set me back. I wanted to have this posted four days ago, but I took my mom to the new MGM in Maryland for three days. Great times. But that "beginner's luck" crap is a myth. I was regretting all my life choices by the time we left. I needed a day for my pity-party of one. So I apologize for that.

**Chapter VI:**

Natasha, Kisa and Rhodey exited the elevator on the communal floor and headed straight for the kitchen and dining area. They could hear multiple voices coming down the hall from that direction, but when they arrived they were surprised to see that everyone was there, even Laura and the children. Natasha raised an eyebrow to see that both Thor and Bruce, who had taken the stairs up only a minute or two ahead of them, had beaten them to the kitchen.

Natasha gave a slight nod to Bruce, who was sat on the near side of the table closer to the far end as she silently pointed Kisa to a seat then moved to get the peanut butter from the cupboard. She noted Vision standing at the stove stirring a large pot that, from the aroma, she assumed was the stew he’d made the night before.

"Kisa, do you want jam?" she called over her shoulder as she grabbed the other items they’d spoken about in the elevator ride up.

"Tasha, how is Tony?" asked Laura, eyes full of genuine concern as she bounced Nate on her lap.

"Unca Ohni!" exclaimed Nate as he often did whenever Tony’s name was mentioned – even if the man himself was not around.

"If you have grape," answered Kisa as she smiled at the baby’s exclamation. "I do not care for strawberry."

Natasha nodded as she opened the fridge and grabbed both the grape jam and the freshly washed celery sticks. "He’s good. No scrapes to speak of and Pepper made sure. He should be up here soon. We left him talking with Steve in his shop."

She noticed as a few people exchanged glances around her at her words, but didn’t comment as she sat everything down on the table in front of Kisa. Kisa immediately began to dig in to her spoils as she smiled at Lila, when she noticed the little girl watching her.

"Oh that’s good. The children and I were worried and wanted to come check on him. We saw the news coverage," she frowned, remembering how the footage had cut into the children’s TV programme before she could keep them from seeing it. "Not to be rude, but who is she?" she nodded her head towards Kisa. She remembered seeing her on the screen next to Tony before the screen had gone out. Laura had thought her to be a kid or, possibly, some student intern, but now
that she had a closer look she could see that the young woman wasn’t a child.

“Her name is Kisa and she’s Tony’s new assistant… among other things,” answered Natasha as she then turned to look at Kisa. “Kisa this is Laura Barton. You’ll get to know her well.”

“It’s a plea-”

“She is of the Devine Guard. One of the High Elite; you owe her your respect,” cut in Thor with a frown from where he stood at the far end of the table.

“It is fine, Thor. This is not Asgard,” shrugged Kisa as she piled peanut butter between two slices of bread. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Laura. You have very beautiful children.”

Laura blinked as she looked between Thor and Kisa, unsure if it was okay for her to reply. After a moment she chose politeness over what was right or not and replied, “Thank you. This little guy’s name is Nate,” she smiled and rubbed a hand over Nate’s head. “He just recently turned two and beside me is Lila and that’s Cooper standing over there by his father.”

Kisa’s eyes moved from child to child as Laura pointed them out and gave each a small, but heartfelt smile. “Hello,” she said to them all once Laura finished giving her their names. “You may call me, Kisa,” she added as she began creating her next sandwich, this one would have jam.

“You’re pretty,” chimed in Lila, smiling at the new lady. She remembered seeing Kisa on TV next to Uncle Tony and was glad to see that she was alright.

“Thank you, Ms. Lila,” replied Kisa, this time with a bright smile on her face that displayed her one dimple. “You’re very pretty, too.”

Lila blushed and leaned closer to her mother as she whispered a thank you to her. Nate, unfazed, clapped and giggled as he tilted his head back to try and look at his mother.

“Does Tony know you’re here?” asked Clint, rudely. He’d never seen Tony allow any of his other SI employees to come up to their floors when they were there.

“Would she be here if he didn’t?” asked Natasha with a roll of her eyes. She refrained from commenting on the fact that between them two, Kisa was more welcome in the tower than he was at the moment. From the frown he gave her she figured her eyes must have said it anyway.

“That’s not what I meant, Tasha, and you know it,” said Clint with a sigh. “I’m just saying it’s not how Tony usually operates.”

“And now you know how Tony usually does things?” she asked as she moved to sit down in the seat between Bruce and Kisa. “Now you know him so well? I wonder where all that knowledge was months ago….”

Clint swallowed and looked away then; unfortunately his looking away caused him to look right at his son. The son who’d asked him to help him practice his archery not even an hour ago, because the man in question had convinced Cooper to give him a chance. Maybe Natasha had a point, he thought as he stared at his son who was staring back at him.

“You don’t have to rub it in, Tash,” he said as he turned back to look at her. “I know I screwed up.”

“Do you?”
“I’m starting to,” he nodded as he looked around him, noticing how everyone was carefully not looking at him except for Thor, Rhodey and Bruce, who were all watching him carefully. Even Wanda was being careful not to look at him.

“He is no saint, you know,” spoke up Wanda with a shrug from her seat at the table across from Nat. “He is not innocent in all this.”

Natasha opened her mouth to reply when she suddenly noticed Kisa stiffen in her seat beside her. She looked over at her in question, but Kisa did not meet her gaze, just continued to sit still and stare down at her plate of sandwiches and celery with peanut butter.

Suddenly Rhodey stood from his seat on the other side of Bruce, pushing back his chair harshly as he stared down at his phone. When he noticed the questioning looks he was getting from Bruce, Thor and Natasha he just silently handed his phone over to Natasha. He watched as Bruce leaned over to read the message on the screen he’d just received from FRIDAY and wasn’t surprised when Natasha’s face hardened and Bruce frowned.

Natasha handed the phone back as she moved to stand, Bruce following, when she and he were suddenly stopped by Kisa. Natasha frowned down at the soft, almost gentle touch to the back of her hand; she hadn’t even seen Kisa moving her hand towards her.

Kisa shook her head as she watched Thor take the phone from Rhodey and immediately read what the others had that she figured was about Tony. “Let him handle it,” she said to them, making eye contact with each of them. “There is nothing you can do for him at this moment and you showing up now will just make matters worse.”

“What?” said Natasha, not sure if she knew what Kisa was trying to say. All she knew is that FRIDAY would not have sent that message if everything was fine with Tony.

“You can do nothing for him right now,” said Kisa, patting her hand before moving her hand back to her plate of food. “Later will be soon enough. He is stronger than he thinks and some things he needs to face alone.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Rhodey, annoyed. He knew he shouldn’t have left Tony alone with Steve and he wasn’t about to let this unknown woman stop him from helping his best friend. He told Steve he’d put a bullet in him, obviously the Captain didn’t believe him.

Kisa looked the Colonel straight in his eyes then. “Trust me.”

Rhodey opened his mouth to tell her where she can take her trust, but was interrupted by Thor before he could make a sound.

“You should trust in her,” said Thor with a nod towards Kisa. “He is her Ward. They have a connection. If he was in true danger she would not still be sitting there; that I can promise you.”

Natasha and Rhodey exchanged similar looks before Natasha finally sat back down with Rhodey mimicking her after Sam quietly pushed his chair closer. Rhodey arched a brow at the other man, but didn’t comment. He didn’t have time for Sam’s guilt when Tony may be in trouble. He turned back to look at Kisa suspiciously, but she just returned his gaze unflinchingly.

Rhodey sighed and nodded, deciding to trust Thor and follow Natasha’s lead. He couldn’t say he trusted Kisa – he didn’t know her – but he didn’t not trust her and Tony did bring her in to all of this... He’d wait and see what happened and he didn’t want to add to whatever was bothering Tony if she was right.
“Okay, what the hell was that?” asked Clint, looking between them all and not liking being in the dark – which was happening quite a lot lately. “I thought you said she was Tony’s assistant, Tash?”

“She is,” shrugged Natasha. She was not about to explain everything to Clint just because he was feeling a little frustrated at being out of the loop.

“But he just called Tony her-”

“Stop that,” spoke up Kisa suddenly, cutting Clint off and grabbing everyone’s attention. She finished putting peanut butter on one of the celery sticks on her plates before gently putting her knife down then raising her gaze.

And looking directly at Wanda.

Even Vision had stopped what he was doing at the stove to turn around and see what was going on. With everyone’s attention on Rhodey, Kisa, Thor and Natasha no one had noticed Wanda’s eyes glowing as she’d watched the unknown woman sitting at the table, but apparently she hadn’t been as discreet as she had thought.

“If you have something to ask me then use your mouth and ask,” said Kisa, eyes serious, but not really angry. “My mind is my own.”

Wanda blinked. She glanced around the room at everyone, uneasily before returning her gaze to Kisa. “How did you do that? No one has ever blocked me before.”

“How I do anything is no concern of yours,” replied Kisa with a shrug as she went back to putting peanut butter on celery, but this time just dipping the celery directly into the jar. “It’s rude to enter someone’s mind without permission. You should be careful; you may one day invite yourself into the wrong person’s head and regret the experience.”

Natasha glared at Wanda before turning to Kisa with a slightly concerned look. “Kisa?”

“I am fine, Natasha. There was no harm done.”

“She is not normal,” said Wanda with a frown of her own. “She blocked me. How can she do that? Who is she and why is she here? What is she to Stark?”

“Why so curious, Wanda?” asked Natasha with a tilt of her head. “Worried there’s someone here for Tony you can’t manipulate?”

“I do not manipulate people.”

“Yes you do,” said Natasha, no longer smirking. “What you did to Tony was on purpose. You wanted him to destroy himself. You brought up my past and I’m betting you did something similar to the others. I didn’t confront you on it later because it wasn’t as if you showed me anything I don’t already know. The past is fact, but that’s not what you did to Tony. You may not have known what exactly he would do, but you knew he would drive himself crazy doing it and most likely take the rest of us with him. It’s what you wanted. It almost worked.”

“I didn’t know he would put everything in danger,” tried Wanda, shaking her head. “How was I to know that?”

“So you’re innocent because you didn’t know what Tony was capable of?” Natasha asked, crossing her arms. “That’s the risk you take every time you do that to people. And that’s your
responsibility. Say what you want, but I read people very well and you knew exactly what you were unleashing. You counted on it; it’s why you didn’t stop him from taking the scepter when you could have.”

“What are you saying, Natasha?” asked Bruce as he looked between the three women. He noticed Kisa had gone very still as she stared at Wanda.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she replied, glancing over at him before returning her gaze to Wanda. “She knew exactly what the scepter would do to Tony. She’d seen it before. It’s what happened to all the other test subjects, right? All the ones that didn't survive?”

“How can you know this? You were not there,” demanded Wanda, shaking her head. She narrowed her eyes as she stared at Natasha.

“It’s what I do,” she replied to her as she leaned forward. “Common sense dictates that HYDRA would have experimented on more than just you and your brother. They would have wanted to make more like you or more powerful than you, if they could. Yet you two were the only ones there with powers... It begs the question, where were the other test subjects? Leaves one to only assume that they didn’t make the cut – one way or another.”

“You are right; I’d seen what the scepter could do to people. How it turned one’s own mind against them. Made them think and do things they would not usually do; slowly driving them mad and eventually killing them if someone didn’t do it for them first,” Wanda nodded. She had nothing left to lose, so what was the point in lying? “But how can you know all this?”

“You think I was the only Widow they created or Barnes the only Winter Soldier?” asked Natasha, face a mask. “That’s not how people like HYDRA work. And you only survive by being the best, but you know that. You used what you knew to take out your enemy and I can appreciate that despite it having been Tony and us you used it on, but don’t you dare sit there and play the victim, because you chose to become what you are. That I have no patience for.”

Wanda swallowed and looked away then. Her eyes fell on Lila then, who was staring at her with wide, worried eyes from the chair beside her. She watched, hollowly, as Laura reached out and grabbed her daughter’s hand, pulling her from her seat and therefore, away from Wanda.

“He does not deserve your loyalty,” stated Wanda quietly. “I do not understand. Why do you follow him? He is not better than Steve.”

“What?” spoke Rhodey as Natasha just stared at Wanda, comprehension slowly crossing her face.

Bruce frowned as he glanced around at everyone else, seeing similar looks of disbelief and disapproval on their faces. Has the witch really been viewing this entire thing as some kind of competition between Tony and Steve?

“You follow him, you side with him, but he has killed so many,” replied Wanda, finally looking back at them. “You all know what he has done, but still you choose to stay with him. Why? What has he done to deserve such care?”

“And how many did you help HYDRA kill, Wanda?” asked Rhodey. “Your hands are not clean either and you fought for the enemy, yet look at where you are.”

“He is not responsible for your parents,” spoke up Natasha, bringing all attention to her.

Wanda stared at her. She couldn’t accept that. She just couldn’t. If she did...
“It was his weapons. He created them,” she breathed as she fisted her hands to hide their trembling.

“What’s going on here?”

Everyone stopped at the sound of the new voice. Tony took in the scene in front of him. He could practically see the tension in the room, it was so thick. Natasha’s back was ramrod straight and she hadn’t moved an inch since he’d entered. Thor stood like a sentinel on the other side of the room, massive arms crossed and a frown marring his handsome features. His eyes were trained on Wanda after aiming a nod at Tony when he had arrived.

He’d heard only a bit of the conversation from the hallway while he’d been walking towards them, but it was enough for him to figure out what they had been discussing.

“Uncle Tony!” exclaimed Lila as she disengaged from her mother’s hand and ran to him, immediately wrapping her small arms around his waist and hid her face against him. “She’s a very mean lady,” whispered Lila as she tried to hide her tears.

Tony immediately wrapped his own arms around the little girl as he ran a hand down the back of her head. “Who’s a mean lady?” Whoever made his sweet pea cry was going to have to deal with him.

Lila quickly turned her head to look directly at Wanda in reply before she turned back to look up at Tony. “Her eyes turned red and she tried to hurt the pretty lady.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow, though no one saw, but Wanda, who was staring back at her. She should have known Lila had seen Wanda using her powers. This wasn’t going to be good.

“Did she now?” he asked Lila as he gave Wanda a fleeting glance before looking back down at her. He saw the tears tracks on her face and frowned as he wiped them away with his thumbs. “It’s going to be alright, sweet pea. No tears, okay? I’ll take care of it.”

Lila nodded and buried her face back against him. She knew her Uncle Tony would fix everything. He was Iron Man and he’d brought her daddy back home just like he’d promised and she knew everything would be okay now that he was there and Aunt Tasha could stop being mad.

“Ohnie,” said Nathaniel as he rested his head on his mom’s shoulder. He was too young to understand what was going on around him, but he could still tell that something wasn’t right and seeing Lila cry had made his own eyes water.

Tony smiled at the little tyke, but couldn’t go to him as he still had his arms full of Lila. “Cooper come take your brother and sister upstairs to the penthouse for me, please.”

Cooper looked over at his dad, who he was stood beside and saw the encouraging look in his eyes before he made his way over to Tony, but stopping to take his baby brother from his mom first.

“Are you sure about this, Tony?” asked Laura as she handed Nate over to her eldest son. “I can take them back downstairs.”

“Of course,” he said as he gently coaxed Lila into letting him go. “FRIDAY will keep them entertained and this way Natasha or Clint won’t have to repeat everything for you later,” he grinned. “Lila I need you to go with your brothers so I can have a little chat with everyone, okay?”

Lila looked up at him and nodded then took her brother’s hand when he stopped next to her with Nate in his other arm. She looked back at her mom and dad and the rest before looking once more
at Tony, who was rubbing a hand over Nate’s head with one hand and squeezing Cooper’s shoulder with the other.

“Go ahead,” said Tony as he tilted his head towards the elevator, whose doors sat conveniently open, waiting for them. “Your mom will come up to get you soon.”

Cooper gave him a half-hearted smile as he led his siblings to the elevator. Tony waited for the doors to close before calling out to his A.I. “Fry make sure no one goes in or out of the penthouse level unless it’s Laura or me or someone with express permission from me.”

“Of course, boss. All three Barton children have arrived at the penthouse. Penthouse on lock-down. Protocol 58329, activated.”

“Now who wants to go first?” he said as he looked at everyone. He couldn’t believe they were having that conversation with kids in the room.

“Tony, are you alright?” asked Rhodey, looking at his friend, assessingly. When Tony returned his look with a questioning one of his own, he added, “FRIDAY sent me a text.”

Tony rolled his eyes then. He should have known, he thought with a sigh. His A.I. had been ready to zap Steve with one of Iron Man’s repulsor beams, so he shouldn’t be surprised that she’d also called for the cavalry. “Of course, she did.”

“Yeah, she did,” he nodded, still watching him closely. “You didn’t answer my question and where is Steve?”

“I’m fine and Steve is changing his shirt,” he shrugged at the look his friend gave him. He’d explain it to him later. “U is still on fire clean-up.”

“Hn,” breathed Rhodey with an arched brow, but didn’t say anymore. He’d find out what exactly that was all about later. Right now, he was just glad to see Kisa had been right.

Tony stepped closer to the table then and put his hands in his pockets. “So what was all that and why were you doing it in front of the children?”

“Ms. Maximoff decided she was curious about your new assistant and decided to take a peak in her head instead of just asking what she wanted to know,” answered Bruce as he turned to look at Wanda. “Apparently it didn’t go as she expected.”

Tony raised his brows in surprise at that as he looked down at Kisa, who was sat closest to where he stood. He blinked at all the food in front of her as she began to eat one of her three sandwiches. “You’re not really going to eat all that are you?”

Kisa took a huge bite of her banana and peanut butter sandwich and chewed before looking at him and replying. “Did you want one? This will hold me while I wait for Vision’s stew. I do so love peanut butter. I can make you a sandwich if you want?”

“That’s alright, you go right ahead. I’ll just have the stew,” he said as he eyed her skeptically. How could someone so small put away so much food? Where did it even go? She couldn’t weigh more than a buck fifty soaking wet! He wasn’t about to voice that observation though; Kisa was proving to be just as … headstrong as the other women around him and he knew just how any one of them would respond, so he had no illusions she’d be any different.

Kisa shrugged and focused her attention back on her food, though she kept a watchful eye on the witch. She didn’t care for the way the other woman was looking at Tony.
“I apologize friend Tony, I think the young ones’ presence was forgotten in the midst of learning young Ms. Maximoff was aware of the Mind stone inside the scepter when she allowed you to take it. It was her intentions for you to be plagued by it’s powers.”

“I figured as much,” nodded Tony at Thor before he aimed his gaze at Wanda, meeting her angry stare. “You can blame me for your parents if you want. I wish I had stopped SI making weapons sooner, but I didn’t,” he said to her, sincerely; not that he believed it would have made a difference, because he had no idea who dropped those shells on Wanda’s home. Sokovia was no use to the United States, so he seriously doubted it was them and if what Maria said earlier was true it was very likely what happened was caused by Stane and whoever he’d sold Tony’s weapons to – which made it Tony’s fault. “So, if blaming me helps you sleep at night, fine, but scaring that little girl… that’s not okay. You need to get a handle on that.”

“I have great control,” breathed Wanda as she slowly stood. “Want to see how well I can control it?” she asked as her eyes and hands began to glow a bright red. “EVERYTHING IS YOUR FAULT!”

“ENOUGH!” yelled Kisa as she slammed her hand down on the table and stood, her eyes blazing a bright blue that looked almost white, it was so bright.

“Again, someone else to protect you, Stark?” sneered Wanda as she raised her hands. “What happened to all that Iron Man courage?”

“He is capable, but that makes him no less mine’s to protect,” said Kisa as everyone took a step back from the two ladies’ standoff, except Tony, who was stubbornly holding his position. “He would rather not cause you harm as you mean something to those who mean something to him. I have no such issue,” she stated then she raised her hand out to Wanda, fingers spread then turned her hand inward so her palm was facing upwards and closed her hand into a fist.

Wanda’s eyes suddenly went wide as her hands flew to her throat; the red glow around them immediately disappearing as did the glow from her eyes. She looked frantically around her as she tried to suck in air, but began to panic as she realized she couldn’t.

“Do you see? I can take the very air from your lungs,” said Kisa as she stared hard at the other woman. She hated to do this to the young witch, but she could see no other way to get through to her. Her friends had tried and were kind about it, but it didn’t work. So perhaps what was needed was someone who wasn’t a friend and didn’t have to be kind. “It is not pleasant being at the mercy of someone else, is it? Someone who holds your very life in their hands and can end it at any moment, whatever their whim?”

Kisa opened her hand and Wanda immediately felt the air in her lungs. She stumbled back against her chair as she took a deep breath and felt a gentle touch on her shoulder as someone tried to steady her. She glanced over her shoulder and was not surprised to see the helping hand belonged to Vision.

“What are you?” whispered Wanda, between deep breaths as she watched the other woman. She had not expected such an attack from one who looked so harmless.

“I am of the Devine Guard and he,” she indicated Tony with a tilt of her head, “is under my protection. You try to harm him again and it will be the last time you try.”

“What the hell is going on here?” asked Steve, incredulously, as he came running into the room in a different shirt and wet hair.
Steve had heard what Kisa had threatened while still in the elevator and was shocked when he’d heard Wanda’s question and realized she was Kisa’s target. He’d immediately tried to beg FRIDAY to make the elevator go faster – if she could do that – but the A.I. was still ignoring him and even though his floor was only one floor below the communal floor, it felt like the elevator had taken forever to get there.

When he arrived he was surprised to see everyone was present and was just standing around letting the two women fight.

“Steve,” Nat called out to him as she grabbed his arm to stop him from moving closer to Kisa or Wanda. She shook her head when he looked at her.

“Nat?”

“Remain where you are, Captain,” said Kisa as she turned to her side so she could look at him behind her and still keep her attention on the witch. She raised her other hand that was incased in what looked like blue flames and held it out towards Steve.

Steve froze as he saw the fire aimed at him and finally got a good look at Kisa’s eyes. He looked around in confusion when he felt a strong wind blow through the room before it seemed to wrap itself around Kisa, gently lifting her ponytail and the tail of her coat-shirt thing.

“I don’t understand; why are you doing this?” asked Steve. He thought Tony’s assistant was on their side. What had happened?

“Steve,” said Natasha, again, getting his attention. Steve noticed that Natasha had one of her knives in her hand after she finally released his arm and crossed hers under her chest. “Wanda was about to attack Tony. Kisa stopped it.”

Steve frowned then as he turned back to look at the women, also crossing his arms over his chest. “What?”

“You all want to treat her like a child? That is your choice,” said Kisa as she looked at him once more before turning back to Wanda. “I will not.”

“Kisa, wait. Please,” began Steve, but Kisa was having none of it.

“No, Captain,” she shook her head, but did not turn to look at him even as the fire around her hand blazed higher. “I have no time for her games. She does not believe the things she says; she just does not want to face the truth, because to do so is to accept that everything she has done, all that she has lost and sacrificed was for nothing.”

Wanda flinched back at her words, shrugging the comforting hand from Vision away from her

“Yes, Wanda Maximoff, I see you. And I don’t like you. You don’t want to believe what you know to be right, because it was your decision to live for revenge, your decision to follow HYDRA and Ultron,” she said as she lowered the hand she had facing Wanda. Kisa knew she had the younger woman’s attention now, so released her from her power as she continued. “And he followed you.”

Wanda’s eyes began to water as she shook her head, frantically. She wasn’t sure if she was denying what the guardian was saying or begging her to stop saying it. It was probably a bit of both, if she was honest. She did not want to think about Pietro.

“Everyone in this room has lost someone important to them so, if it is help you require you have
plenty here who would gladly help you,” said Kisa softly, but firm. “Denying the truth will not bring him back and it will not ease your pain. Anthony did not cause your hurt and does not deserve your hate. You know this; you have seen the kind of man he is. Hate will not make what hurts you go away. It will only make it worse and make you a danger to yourself and to those around you who only wish to help you.” Kisa’s gaze flickered to Vision then, who still stood behind Wanda in a place of silent support should she want it.

The tears began to stream down Wanda’s face as she nodded, finally accepting what she had long since began to realize. “I know.”

Kisa lowered her other hand then. She quietly stepped around the table and stood directly in front of Wanda, who’d turned to face her as she approached. Gently she reached a hand out and cupped the younger woman’s cheek.

“Your brother’s death was not your fault,” she said to her as she looked Wanda in her eyes. “He chose his path as we all do. Even if he knew the truth, he would have followed you; because you were his as he was yours. He would not want your guilt.” Her eyes flicked back and forth between Wanda’s, looking to see if her words were sinking in at all before she removed her hand and took a step back. “Now. You have chosen to make yourself a weapon and that cannot be undone, so you can either own that power or let it own you. Your choice. Your power is connected to your emotions, so you must learn to keep a level head when in battle and to think before you act and not react. Your fear and panic is dangerous to all around you, so you must learn to block it, channel it or work through it. Whichever way works best for you. No one way is right or wrong. Until you can do this, things, like what happened in Lagos, will happen again and again. And that makes you more of a liability to this team than an asset. You should also know that if you prove to be a threat to Anthony I will end you.”

Wanda swallowed and nodded as she looked back at her. In that moment she got the sudden feeling that Kisa was much older than she appeared. She’d thought the other woman to be quite young, maybe somewhere around her own twenty-six years, but now she was certain that Kisa was much older than that, because she spoke like a woman who had done and seen too much to have only lived less than thirty years.

Kisa watched Wanda in turn, waiting to see if the other woman really had listened to what she said or was playing coy, but after a silent moment passed between them she felt that Wanda really had heard her and was finally willing to do something about it.

“Good,” said Kisa with a nod as she took another step back then turned to go back to her seat. She stopped as she came face to face with Steve then narrowed her eyes. “You also need to learn to control your temper, Captain. You act without thought; reaction. It is not your strength that is your problem,” she said to him with a quick glance in Tony’s direction that would have been missed, if Steve wasn’t watching her so intently. Kisa paused another moment, as if she was going to say something else, before changing her mind and sitting back down in her seat. She quickly began eating again as the silence grew around her.

Steve blinked as he watched the petite woman sit and grab a sandwich with one hand and a celery stick covered in peanut butter with the other. Suddenly a thought came to him as he remembered the wind that had swept through the room and wrapped around the woman eating – in a room whose windows were not open, he noticed with a quick glance in their direction.

“It wasn’t Thor who helped me outside, was it?” he asked as his eyes stayed on the back of her head. To her credit, Kisa didn’t stop or slow down in her eating at all at his words, though he was certain she heard him. “Why do I get the feeling I owe my life to you?”
Kisa finished her celery stick with a happy hum before she turned in her seat to look at Steve; absently she noticed others had also sat back down and Vision had returned to heating up his stew – which she hoped would be ready soon.

“Tell me, Captain, do you save and protect others with the expectation of receiving something in return?”

“What? No, of course not,” said Steve with a frown.

“Then why would you assume I do?”

Steve blinked. He hadn’t thought that’s what he was doing. It had just been a simple question. He just wanted to confirm that it was her who had saved him earlier and not Thor. “But it was you who saved me, right?”

KIsa shrugged and turned back around; neither agreeing with nor denying his claims.

Steve looked to Thor then, figuring the blonde god would answer him. He wasn’t disappointed. “Thor?”

“Nay, Captain, Mjolnir and I may call upon both lightning and thunder, but we do not hold command of the elements, though many of the Divine Guard does, if not all.”

“Most, but not all,” agreed Kisa with a nod. “It is a skill just like flying or any other ability. Some have it, some do not. Few hold command over all four elements, most only one or two like myself.”

“Fire and air,” said Tony, watching her again.

She smiled at him and ate another celery stick. Tony was getting the feeling she was really serious about this whole protecting him thing. He knew what happened outside should have been proof enough, but wouldn’t anyone help in a situation like that if they had the ability? But she didn’t have to put herself between him and Wanda… In fact, she hadn’t even shown her powers until Wanda had displayed her own. Until she believed him to be in true danger did she act, just like in front of the Tower earlier.

Tony didn’t question her identity, but he did have a hard time believing she was there only to protect him. He could admit, if only to himself, that there was something about her that was almost familiar even though he was certain this was the first time they’d ever truly met, but to believe she’d been with him, protecting him his entire life…. When? How?

Where was she when he faced Killian, and Vanko, and Stane… and the cave? Not to mention countless other incidents in his youth and after? He just didn’t understand it and until he could he wasn’t sure if he could fully believe she was here for his protection. They were obviously going to need to talk soon, once he was ready to hear the answer to those questions.

Right now, food was more important.

Tony glanced at Steve, but quickly looked away as he took the seat at the end of the table next to Kisa. He turned to look at Laura as she sat down in the seat her daughter had been using and gave her an encouraging grin.

“You doing alright?” he asked her as she met his gaze. He knew that being around them all at once could be overwhelming for a person not used to it.
“Are you?” Laura countered with an arched brow, but didn’t wait for an answer. She had no wish to put Tony or his feelings on the spot in a room full of people that she knew he still wasn’t comfortable around. “You all seem so larger than life when seeing you on TV and knowing what you can do, that it’s easy to forget that beneath it all you’re all quite human with human problems.”

“I think that point is relative,” stated Vision as he sat a bowl of stew down in front of Tony. At Tony’s surprised look he stated, “You need to eat more, sir.”

Tony blinked at that then pouted. “I eat.”

“In comparison to what, if I may ask?” replied Vision as he moved back to the stove to turn off the burner. “You all may help yourselves; the stew is sufficiently heated.”

Laura hid her smile as she noted the slightly jealous looks from around the table being aimed in Tony’s direction – and his complete obliviousness to it – before she got up to help herself to some of the delicious smelling stew.

“Natasha, Kisa would you two like a bowl?” she called over her shoulder. At first, she wasn’t going to ask Tony’s new assistant, but she’d noticed when she sat the other woman was almost finished with the food she already had and didn’t look close to slowing down, so she decided to take a chance in the end. Turned out to be a good idea after all.

Kisa eyes widened slightly in surprise at the unexpected offer and then she smiled in gratitude and nodded in reply. “Thank you so much.”

While Natasha replied almost at the same time, “Thank you, Laura. Need any help?”

Laura waved her off with one hand as she reached inside the cabinet for three bowls with her other. She’d been dishing up food for at least three for years and was now an expert at it. This was the last thing she needed help with. “Vision, I think you’re more human than you realize,” she whispered to the android as she moved beside him to get to the large pot of stew.

Vision gave the brunette a curious look as he felt a slight warmth in his insides at her words. He wasn’t certain what the name of the feeling was, but he felt an almost overwhelming need to say thank you.

“Oh my God, she eats like Tasha,” breathed Clint as he watched Kisa quickly finish off her last half of sandwich and her last celery stick with peanut butter. At his remark, Kisa looked directly at him then and he froze, eyes wide, as he got his first good look at the unusual color of her eyes. Kisa arched a brow at his stare before she broke eye contact to smile at Laura when she sat a bowl of stew down in front of her.

“Remarkable, aren’t they?” muttered Sam from beside him. He’d caught Clint’s staring and really couldn’t blame him; he’d done his own fair share of staring when she’d entered the room with Nat. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes that color… that’s definitely not blue.”

Clint grunted in agreement as he watched his wife hand Tasha a bowl before sitting down with her own meal and beginning to eat. “Babe, what about me and the rest of us?”

Laura glanced over at him as she ate; the stew was as good as it smelled. “You heard Vision, help yourselves.”

Clint’s mouth dropped while both Sam and Steve laughed.

“Well, Clint, I believe your wife has spoken,” grinned Steve as he stood to get himself some food.
Bruce was already at the stove dishing a bowl for himself and most likely Rhodey.

“Thor? Sam?” he asked them as he grabbed bowls.

“Sure, thanks man,” said Sam with big smile and a wink at Clint, who was looking betrayed.

“I got Thor’s, Captain,” said Bruce as he finished filling his own bowl. “Perhaps, you should offer to get some for Clint? He looks like he’s about to cry.” They exchanged knowing looks as they both looked over at Clint, who really did look like he was going to cry as he sat pouting.

Steve rolled his eyes as he filled a bowl for Scott, Clint and himself. Wanda had declined a bowl, stating she wasn’t hungry. He placed a bowl in front of Clint at the breakfast bar before he made his way to his seat, handing Scott his bowl as he sat.

Clint hummed in delight as he began to inhale his food. “See, I don’t need you guys. Cap, still loves me.”

Steve snorted. “All I did was get you a bowl, I didn’t make it for you.”

Everyone smiled or snickered at Clint’s affronted look, but no one commented. They were all too busy stuffing their faces to do anything more.

Tony smiled into his bowl at the illusion in front of him. And it was an illusion. They were all here eating together, laughing and joking – even Wanda, though she was turned in her seat and talking quietly with Vision instead of eating, but she was there, a cup of tea in hand. They looked like a team – a family, again. But that’s all it was. Looks. They weren’t a family again and he wasn’t sure if they ever would be or if he even wanted them all back. That was partially why he was having the Avenger’s Facility upstate expanded so, it can accommodate both new and old members.

Now when they were all finally allowed to leave the Tower, even if they signed the Accords, they would have the option of living somewhere else, which is something he was sure many of them wanted. And that was fine with Tony.

But it was still a nice illusion.

Tony looked up then and ended up catching Rhodey’s eye, who he realized must have been watching him and waiting for him to do just that. He shook his head slightly when his friend raised an eyebrow at him, silently asking him what was wrong. They would talk later when they were alone and not surrounded by many ears. Rhodey tilted his head then as he gestured with his eyes in the direction of Steve. Tony didn’t follow his gesture – not needing to look to know who he was asking about – he just shook his head once more, not wanting to draw Steve’s attention to him.

Suddenly there was an audible snap in the air and Tony had to fight not to roll his eyes at the familiar sound as a large ring of fire appeared in the air and a moment later Strange stepped into the room.

“Ah, Tony Stark, there you are. Good. We have no time to waste,” exclaimed the sorcerer as he made his way quickly over to Tony. He didn’t even seem to care or notice the unease his sudden appearance had caused in many of the other inhabitants in the room. Tony was willing to bet it was the latter; the man was truly oblivious to anyone he had no interest in.

“What are you talking about, Strange?” asked Tony as he pushed his bowl away. It was empty any way, but he had been contemplating getting a second helping.
“Who the hell is he and where the hell did he just come from?” asked Clint, looking around at everyone else.

“I’m talking about your sleeping King, of course,” replied Strange with a roll of his eyes; ignoring the man with the nice arms who’d spoken. “What else would I be talking about? Now come. We must move fast. They are going to start prepping him for surgery soon and if that happens things will get extremely messy. Is that beef stew I smell?”

“Focus, Strange; what surgery?”

“I am focused. What? A man can’t appreciate good food as he works? Stop trying to limit me, Stark,” he said with only a little bit of frustration in his voice. “And the king’s surgery, of course. Stop asking inane questions, we do not have time for this. Didn’t I just say we need to move fast? Why are you still sitting there?” He waved his hand and Tony’s chair slid back from the table; an obvious invitation for him to get up.

Strange turned around and quickly opened another portal, this one leading to Tony’s worklab, he noticed as he stood to follow the other man. Apparently they needed to rework the plan if they were about to operate on Odin. And what was that about anyway?

Strange stepped through the portal then turned to look at everyone else, whom he noticed was still sitting in their seats staring at him. “Is this the usual action response of the Avengers? If so, it’s very concerning. Come on, people, through the portal. You know who you are. What part of ‘fast’ are you missing?” he said as he arched a brow at them.

Kisa and Natasha exchanged looks as they stood, suppressing their grins as they followed the doctor with Bruce and Rhodey bringing up the rear.

“Come on Thor, it seems your father may be in trouble,” said Tony as he moved towards the portal.

“Is that what he was saying?” asked Thor as he followed Tony, a frown on his face. “He was talking as fast as Loki does when he gets excited about whatever horrible plan he’d come up with that I had immediately tuned him out as I often did with my brother. It’s a reflex response now. When we were children, the best way to stop one of Loki’s pranks was to be sure to show no interest in them.”

“Hmm. And did that work for you?”

“Not as often as I would have liked, considering a great deal of his pranks were aimed at me in the end. Or father.”

“You don’t say,” said Tony with a grin. He’d figured that would be the answer. You don’t get known as the Trickster God by giving up on a prank simply because of a lack of interest from your intended target. “Vision could you bring some of that stew with you to lab in a travel cup?”

“If you like,” Vision replied as he moved to do as requested.

“Thanks buddy and be quick about it, too. I think we may need you for this one.”

“I shall be right there, sir,” said Vision over his shoulder, not stopping his movements.

As the portal closed Clint, Sam, Scott, Laura and Wanda exchanged identical confused looks.

“You all just saw a man with a neat cape walk out of a flaming circle, right?” asked Scott as he
stared straight ahead; incidentally exactly where the portal had appeared and disappeared from.

“And take the others with him? Yeah,” nodded Clint.

“Oh, just checking,” nodded Scott, too, eyes wide. “I mean, I’ve seen some strange things since I’ve started hanging around you people and sometimes a guy just needs to double check that he’s not going crazy, you know.”

Laura, Sam and Wanda nodded in heartfelt agreement.

“That was the sorcerer, Dr. Strange. He is a friend of Mr. Stark,” said Vision as he stopped in front of them for a moment. “You will have to excuse me as there is somewhere else I must be now. I will let Captain Rogers explain the details,” he added and then quickly faded through the floor, taking a large cup of the beef stew he made with him.

After a moment, everyone turned expectant eyes on Steve.

~TA~~T
“They would dare?!” hollered Thor, anger rolling off his every pore. “I will raise that entire facility to the ground if they lay one finger on him.”

“How about we not let it get to that?” said Tony with a pat on one of Thor’s massive biceps. “Strange can we get him out using one of your portals?”

“I can,” he nodded, taking the stew with a grateful nod at Vision. “It will take me more time to break the enchantment on him, but I can move him through the portal while it’s in place.” He wondered if he should mention a certain canine, but figured it could wait ‘til after. They were losing time already. “Is there somewhere specific I should bring him?”

“Here. I will have a place ready for him by the time you return,” replied Tony. “Now how much time do you think you’ll need? I can keep the video feed blocked for a time, but I don’t want to do it for too long if someone is watching it as closely as it seems they are and give them time to notice.”

“If you can get me five uninterrupted minutes, I can be back in that time frame.”

“Okay, we don’t have time to wait for Nat’s friend, so Thor you’re staying here,” stated Tony. He held up a hand to stop Thor’s protest before he could even get a word out. “I know you want to go, buddy, but we’re not doing this the right way. We’re going in, we’re getting him and we’re getting out. They are going to notice he’s missing very quickly, but considering the unorthodox way they are handling his surgery, I’m going to go out on a limb and bet that whoever is so interested in your father isn’t going to raise the normal alarms.”

“So what’s your plan, Tony?” asked Natasha, seeing the merit of doing this quickly.

“I think it should be Bruce and Vision to go with Strange. Bruce is not well known in the medical world to be instantly recognized, but knows enough medical jargon to speak with a nurse or doctor, sufficiently. Vision can change his appearance and accompany him as his assistant while he use his abilities to keep everyone’s mind distracted from Odin’s room long enough for Strange to get in and out.”

“Should not we ask Wanda to do this?” asked Vision, knowing that Wanda’s powers over the mind were much better than his own.

“Can’t Viz, her face is too well known now, she may be recognized,” said Tony with a shake of his head. He also wasn’t keen on relying on Wanda or her abilities for this. Vision may have faith in the witch, but Tony didn’t.

Vision nodded, recognizing the logic of his point. “I should be able to do this without difficulty. It does not require me to enter multiple minds at once, just a simple redirection of everyone’s attention for a short time.”

“Exactly,” nodded Tony.

Bruce frowned, but he could see how he was the best choice to go in for this. “How do you want me to keep the nurses distracted?”

“Stick to the same plan as before, just this time you won’t be with the searching family member, but you’re doing the searching for him. Ask about the other two John Does. See if they have medical issues equal to the family member you’re looking for. You ask the questions and let the nurses go through the files; that will give them something to do while you talk and keep them engaged.”
Bruce had to admit, it was a good plan. It was simple and to the point. He and Vision could be in and out and by the time they raise the alarm over a missing patient they’ll be long gone and only remember that Bruce had asked about the two patients still there.

“Alright,” he nodded. “When do we leave?”

“Now,” said Strange, waving his hands and opening a portal not far from Walter Reed’s main entrance. “They will be coming to get him in less than ten minutes.”

Vision shut his eyes and immediately changed his image to look like a young man, possibly of residency age, with brown hair and brown eyes.

Tony moved over to one of his stations and immediately started connecting to the video feed. “I’ll have the video feed down and on a five minute loop in two minutes, Strange. That gives you exactly seven minutes from right now to get in there and get back out.”

“Plenty of time, Tony,” called Strange with a cocky grin from the other side of the open portal before it immediately shut.

Tony rolled his eyes, but kept working. “Nat, could you get the bed I have in the back room ready for me? I’d rather keep the king down here until Strange can wake him up, just in case.”

Natasha nodded and headed to the back, already knowing exactly what back room Tony was talking about.

“Just in case of what, Tones?” asked Rhodey as he moved closer to his friend. “What are you expecting?”

“I’m expecting our friend on the other side of that camera to sooner or later put in an appearance,” he replied. “In twenty seconds start the loop, Fry.”

“On it, boss.”

“You think they will come after my father?” asked Thor with a concerned frown.

“I’d bet my considerable fortune on it,” said Tony as he turned to look at Thor. “Someone is very interested in your father’s ability to remain completely healthy while in a coma. There should be some wear and tear on the body, like a drop in weight, calories, etc., but with your father there isn’t. Now we all know why that is, of course, but those doctors don’t.”

“And this is important?”

“Too important, if you ask me,” frowned Tony. “Why else put a camera in your father’s room and then go through the trouble of hiding the videos? Nothing good has ever come from that kind of curiosity, trust me.”

Just then Natasha walked back over to them, a curious look on her face as she stopped in front of Tony. “The bed is ready. I have one question though; why is U pacing the shop holding the fire extinguisher like he’s ready to attack?”

All eyes turned to him then as Tony froze, dread and disbelief fighting for dominance on his face.

TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~

Bruce and Vision exited the elevator on the third floor of Walter Reed National Military Medical
Center and followed the signs to their destination. Strange had separated from them almost immediately, only stopping to make sure he and Vision knew where to meet him for the return trip. They were just passing a supply closet when the door suddenly opened and out walked a young woman in a nurse’s uniform.

All three froze in shock momentarily, not having expected to run into anyone before the nurse gathered herself together first and smiled at them.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see you guys there,” she shook her head as she shut the closet door behind her. “Can I help you two find anything?”

“No, thank you, we’re good,” declined Bruce with a polite smile. “I’m just here to get information for a patient of mine who thinks his missing father may be here.”

She tilted her head at them then as she gave them both contemplative looks. After a moment she looked down the hall both ways as she seemed to come to some sort of decision then stepped closer to them.

“I was wondering how long it was going to take you guys to get here,” she said quietly. “You chose a good time; most the doctors here now are on lunch or in with other patients, but Nurse Hatcher and Rhonda, Nurse Daniels, are at the Nurses’ Station up ahead and you’ll have to get pass them if you want to get to him.”

Vision and Bruce exchanged confused looks. “Excuse me?”

She rolled her eyes then. “You’re here for the man in room 1358, right? You’re Dr. Banner and you’re not the kind of doctor that would be sent here unless it’s for Avenger reasons,” she said then paused and looked around once more before continuing with a nod at Vision, “I haven’t figured out who you are, but I have a good guess.”

Bruce blinked. He took in the young woman’s blond hair that was pulled back into a bun and her big blue eyes and tried to decide if she was going to be a problem. They didn’t have time to waste and she didn’t seem like she was trying to stop them. He decided to play it out and see where it would go.

“Ms…” he looked down at her name tag then; Gwen Poole, “Poole how do you know about all that?” He asked as he glanced at Vision, who stood quietly beside him.

“You don’t really have time to get into all that do you?” she asked with an arched brow. “Look, I’m just trying to help. They’re planning to cut into his head soon and I’d hate to see what will happen if they do and Thor finds out. I’ll keep Dr. Fujikawa distracted as long as I can – she’s the one scheduled to do the surgery – and you two do whatever you’re here to do, but be quick; Fujikawa won’t entertain my nonsense forever.”

“We appreciate your assistance,” spoke Vision for the first time.

She smiled then. “I knew it; you are Vision. Nice disguise.” She turned to run in the opposite direction then stopped suddenly and spun back to them. “Oh, I almost forgot, be sure to tell Stark that name, okay? Dr. Fujikawa.”

She didn’t wait for their nod before she spun around again and took off down the hall. Both Bruce and Vision watched her disappear when she turned down another hall to her left before turning to continue, quickly, to the Nurses’ Station.

“Did you know her, Vision?” asked Bruce under his breath as they hurried.
“Not at all,” replied Vision as he followed. “I found her knowledge to be quite curious, but I did not sense any deception coming from her.”

“Yeah,” agreed Bruce with a slight frown. Maybe Tony knew her? And what was it about the doctor that was so important? Whatever it was, they’d have to worry about it and Gwen Poole later, because they had reached the Nurses’ Station and according to the time on the wall behind the two ladies, they had less than four minutes before they needed to be heading back to meet with Strange.

“Excuse me?” Bruce called out, plastering an open smile on his face.

“Yes? How can I help you, sir?” asked the younger woman with dark hair, who was closer to where they stood. From her name tag he could see that she was Rhonda Daniels.

“I’m looking for a patient of mine that I was lead to believe may be here,” he replied with a look of inquiry. “Do you have any patients that you have been unable to identify?”

“We do,” she nodded. “A few actually. May I ask your name?”

“I’m Dr. Banner and my patient is an older gentleman by the name of Donald Blake, Sr. Would it be possible for me to visit these patients to see if one of them is who I’m looking for? You see, Mr. Blake is also the father of a friend and his family would really like to find him as well.”

“L.”

“Excuse me, I couldn’t help, but overhear,” cut in the other nurse, suddenly.

Bruce blinked. She was an older lady with graying hair and from her demeanor and the way Nurse Daniels seemed to shrink back at her interruption, Bruce got the feeling she was probably superior to Daniels in some way. Most likely she was head of the Nurses’ Department.

“It’s against Hospital Policy to allow visitors into the patient’s room without a clear knowledge that the visitor is a relation or known to the patient. I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright,” smiled Bruce, trying to look like seeing the patients wasn’t really necessary to him. “I don’t really have time to see them all, anyway. I have another hospital to check after this one. How about I tell you some of his medical profile and you can just tell me if any of them match? I know due to Patient confidentiality I can’t look at the files, but if you could for me this could go faster.”

“I don’t think that would be a problem,” smiled the older lady, something in her eyes putting Bruce on guard. “Let me just grabbed their files.”

He and Vision exchanged identical glances, but chose not to comment in front of the other nurse, who had only walked over to one of the other computers not far from them.

“Oh, got them,” she said as she came back out from the office behind the station. “Tell me what to look for.”

“Right,” nodded Bruce, thinking fast. He had to keep this plausible, so it had to be almost right.

“He’s a Caucasian male, approximately seventy-one years old with very poor vision in his right eye. He has a heart murmur that I’ve been monitoring, not anything to worry about, but something to keep watch of. Hopefully that hasn’t changed. He’s very fit for his age, muscular, due to working in construction for most his life. His iron and cholesterol would be a little on the high side, but again, nothing to be concerned about. And because of his dislike of hospitals in general
he’d be a pretty ornery patient.”

She nodded as she began looking through the files. They both waited and watched, noticing that she read through the first and last files much more thoroughly than she did the middle file. In fact, she barely even looked at the middle file; she’d just opened it and skimmed it for maybe ten seconds before moving to the next.

Bruce bet he knew who that middle file belonged to as he waited patiently for the woman to tell him who he was looking for wasn’t there. He glanced up at the clock on the wall and blanched when he realized their time limit was up.

“Ah, I thought that maybe this patient, Doe, John P., might be who you were looking for, but there is no mention of a heart murmur in his records and his iron levels are low instead of high. I’m so sorry,” she smiled and shook her head as she looked up at them.

“That’s okay. I thank you for checking,” he nodded at her. “Well, we’ll be going then. We have one more place to check then back to the police. Thank you, again, for your time.”

Vision nodded at both ladies before turning and walking away with Dr. Banner beside him. He waited until they were safely on the elevator and out of sight or hearing range of the two nurses before turning towards Dr. Banner.

“We are behind schedule.”

“I know,” sighed Bruce. “Let’s hope Ms. Poole is still keeping Dr. Fujikawa distracted. Not that it matters, once the nurses go into his room to begin prepping him they will immediately see he’s not there and sound the alarm. Hopefully we can get out of this hospital before that.”

“Indeed,” nodded Vision as he turned back to face forward. “That nurse was also lying. She did not read that second file at all.”

“No, she didn’t.” said Bruce, frowning. He had not been expecting a nurse to possibly be in on whatever was going on here, which was probably not wise of him, because it was the nurses that tended to know more about the patients and the hospital than even the doctors. It would make sense to have a nurse on their side and even more so to have the head nurse. “I think we can hazard a guess as to who’s file that was.”

“Do you think Strange was successful?” asked Vision as they exited the elevator on the main floor and headed for the entrance.

“We gave him more time than he-”

Suddenly alarms started blaring, loudly, cutting him off. He and Vision exchanged a look and quickly hurried out before they could get stuck inside the hospital on lockdown protocols.

“I think that’s a yes,” yelled Bruce as they ran to where they were supposed to have met up with Strange nearly three minutes ago.

Bruce sighed in relief when they turned the corner and saw a familiar figure in a flowing red cape standing next to an older man in a hospital gown sleeping in a wheel chair. There was a large black dog with green eyes lying on the ground beside the older man.

“You’re late,” said Strange as he turned and immediately opened the portal.

“Sorry,” said Bruce, moving closer as he eyed the dog, curiously. “We had… some unexpected
“Hmm. Good help?” he asked as he stepped back to wave them through while he grabbed the handles of the wheel chair. “Go on. They’ll be checking the outside perimeters soon.”

“So far,” nodded Bruce as he walked through the portal behind Vision. “How about you? Run into any trouble?”

“Not necessarily,” replied Strange as he pushed the king through the portal, waving the dog through with him. “I did meet a rather peculiar nurse. I got the distinct feeling she knew exactly who I was and why I was there.”

Vision returned to his normal image as the portal closed behind them then turned to look at the sorcerer. “If you are speaking of the same nurse we met than you would be quite correct; she knew exactly who you are.”

“You guys are late,” said Tony as he walked up to them. “But I see you were successful. Good. There’s a room for you to put him in back that way. Thor will show you where.”

Thor gave a broad smile as he bent to lift his father into his arms. “I cannot thank you guys enough. Though he does not look like Father, I can sense that he is, indeed, him.”

“What did I tell you about thanks, Big Guy? Go ahead and put your Father in the bed,” replied Tony with a grin, happy that they were able to help Thor get his father back. “Now, Strange can get to work on waking him up.”

“Waking him would be easier if I had a bit more information,” said Stephen as he crossed his arms and looked down at the dog standing with his guard up, a few steps to his left.

“What kind of information? And what is that? And why is it in my shop?” asked Tony, pointing at the dog. “And did I hear something about a nurse who knew you? You can answer those in any order you like.”

Everyone else stepped forward as they looked back and forth from Strange to the dog. Strange, in turn, didn’t look bothered at all by the dog as he watched the animal stiffen at Thor’s return to the group. He arched a brow at the dog and wondered how long he thought he could keep this up before turning to the group.

“I could use more information on whatever spell was used to put the king to sleep. It is quite old and so far I do not recognize it,” shrugged Strange, he wasn’t that worried about the spell. He’d break it with or without help. “That appears to be a dog and he’s here because he seems to prefer going where the king goes. I saw no point in stopping him; he’d have just shown up here anyway. And yes, there was a nurse there who saw me and seemed to know me, but she was much too young to have ever worked with me, but according to them,” he nodded towards Bruce and Vision, “she knew exactly who I was.”

“That’s because she knew exactly who we were and knew about King Odin and Thor,” said Bruce. “She mentioned you as well, Tony.”

“Well, that’s not surprising; everyone knows me,” he grinned when both Nat and Kisa rolled their eyes. “What did she say?”

“She wanted us to be sure to tell you the doctor scheduled to perform the surgery was Dr. Fujikawa.”
Tony couldn’t stop the flinch if he tried. Rhodey immediately grabbed his arm, eyes cold as he frowned. “Are you sure that was the name she said, Banner?”

Bruce nodded as Vision spoke, “I heard it as well. That was the name she said; Dr. Fujikawa.”

Rhodey grimaced as he and Tony looked at one another, neither liking what this could mean. “It can’t be her, Tones. You really think she could have become a surgeon? Last I remember learning was the last thing she was interested in.”

Tony frowned. Rhodey had a point, but… “It could be someone related to her though, which is just as bad.”

Rhodey nodded. “I’ll look into it. It won’t look suspicious if I ask the questions and you can look your way.”

Tony nodded, mind still whirling.

“Anthony?” called out Kisa then. “Is there a problem?”

“I’m not sure yet. Maybe,” he replied, pressing a hand to his chest. This day was just getting better and better.

“How long do you plan on keeping this up?”

Everyone turned to the unexpected question, surprised at the derisive tone they had all assumed was aimed at Tony, but when they looked it was the dog Strange was eyeing and not the engineer.

Tony arched a brow.

“I was not aware pets on Midgard could speak,” said Thor, enthusiasm coloring his voice. “Do they know all your tongues?”

Bruce grinned at his friend. “Pets here don’t speak, Thor,” he told him then paused as a thought came to him. “Pets on Asgard can speak?”

“Of course not,” smiled Thor. “That would be strange. Imagine were Sleipnir to speak back to father,” he laughed. “But if your pets do not speak than why does he talk to the canine as if he waits for a response?”

“That’s a very good question,” agreed Tony, looking back at Stephen. “Strange?”

Strange looked at them all and shrugged. “Well, obviously, I’m speaking to him because I would like an answer. It’s a perfectly logical question. He can’t possibly think I would allow this to go on forever. It’s already testing my patience.”

“What can’t go on? He’s a dog,” asked Rhodey with a confused look on his face. He looked over at Tony, but Tony was staring at the dog with a suspicious look on his face.

“Is he?” asked Strange as he arched a brow and looked pointedly at the dog.

Suddenly, Tony lifted his hand, gauntlet in place and aimed at the canine. “You know, I say we check starting from the inside.”

Both Natasha and Rhodey pulled out their guns and aimed at the dog, trusting Tony’s lead. Natasha narrowed her eyes in suspicion as she saw Kisa cross her arms from the corner of her eyes.
All of sudden a bright green light flared through the room and a tall, dark haired man in black and green leather stood where there was once a dog; the same green eyes staring at them all.

“Loki!” roared Thor, his fist tightening around Mjolnir's handle.

“Hello brother,” he tried to smile, but found it difficult with all the weapons pointed at him. Also the telling green glow in Dr. Banner’s eyes was not making him feel at all welcome. “You know, this is not how I imagined our reunion with Father.”
Chapter VII

Chapter Notes

I apologize to everyone for the long wait. I've the last month from HELL. The sump pump (which I recently learned is actually a SEWAGE pump) in my house broke nearly 4 weeks ago, flooding my basement. And if anyone is familiar with this you know the STENCH that comes with it. We had to clean the carpets multiple times, yet the smell would not leave. After the 1st week passed we realized a room we thought didn't get hit did. This room is a storage, really, so many things including the carpet was ruined. Jump 3 weeks and we have to pull the carpet up out of that room because stench will not leave and we discover the nasty sewage water got into the padding under the carpet. Of course we had to get everything out of that room first... I HATE MY LIFE.

So, I apologize for not having the time nor inclination to post... though I did continue writing. So yay. As an apology I am giving you all 2 CHAPTERS with this post. And the next should be out in a week and a half. Maybe sooner. :) Again, I do apologize and I thank you all for sticking with me through this. And if you can throw a prayer out there for me and my sanity I'd be forever grateful.

~Duchess (such as I currently am :/)

Chapter: VII:

Tony stared, along with everyone else, at the Asgardian God before them with a mixture of annoyance and exhaustion on his face. He wasn’t at all surprised to see the trickster god and was already beginning to feel the bone-deep tiredness that came with him. He had a feeling that once they found the king Loki wouldn’t be too far behind – though he had hoped they’d have a day or two of peace before he arrived.

Apparently, it seemed there was no arrival necessary as it appeared the god had been staying pretty close to the king already.

“Why am I not surprised?” said Tony with a roll of his eyes, not lowering the repulsor he had aimed at the god. “Alright, Cujo, why are you in my tower? I don’t remember inviting you.”

Loki open his mouth to respond when suddenly four laser guns lowered from the ceiling and turned towards him.

“Lasers armed and locked, boss,” spoke a female voice from somewhere around and above him. Loki couldn’t help looking around; trying to find the owner of said voice before turning his gaze back to the people in front of him and arching a brow. He had no idea the building could speak.

“Yet it seems you were expecting me,” he grinned at the engineer, but didn’t make a move to approach him knowing it would not be a good idea on his part.
“Those weren’t for you, but they’ll do,” replied Tony, ignoring the looks he knew he was receiving from a few of the people with him. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I think I’d like to hear your response as well, brother,” said Thor as he crossed his arms over his chest, a frown marring his face.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked, feigning innocence. “Someone has to protect Father.”

“Protect? Is that the answer you are going with?” growled Thor, jaw hardening with a tick as he tried to hold on to his anger. “You placed Father in an enchanted sleep and took his throne to protect him? You put all of the Nine Realms in possible jeopardy and your only reply is that you were protecting him?”

Loki frowned. Thor was really angry with him this time. Usually when Thor was angered by him it was fleeting and always underplayed by the love he knew his brother had for him, but this time he could see none of that. He knew Thor would not risk losing Mjolnir by striking Loki out of pure anger and revenge with her, but his brother was still capable of doing great damage on his own. He could exile him.

Loki swallowed and tried not to imagine that prospect as he opened his mouth to reply to his brother, but was quickly overridden as Thor was apparently not finish.

“Once more you lied and faked your death with no care for how it would affect anyone else, but I guess that didn’t matter to you as I was the only one who would be effected for any length of time, correct?” he questioned as he took a step forward. “Is that how you did it, Loki? Did you corner him while he was in his grief over you then attack him while he was low? After all, he’d just lost Mother as well and he had no idea if I would be successful in my campaign against the Dark Elves. Your death would have come as a great sorrow to him... he would not have been prepared. Did you strike him while he was in pain and worried or hit him with your enchantment from behind? Did he know before he fell that it was you? Or does he lay there, frozen, still believing his wife and youngest son dead?”

Loki’s eyes widened as he took an involuntary step backwards. He’d never seen Thor like this before. He knew he’d flinched at the mention of Frigga; her death still weighing on his conscience to this day. He would never forget the unintentional role he’d played in her demise. And though he tried to hide his reaction, he knew from the look in Thor’s eyes that his adopted brother had seen it. Loki wasn’t sure if Thor understood the true reason for his guilt though and he couldn’t help admitting to a slight bit of fear at the possibility.

“You have done some very horrible things in the past, Loki, but I cannot think of anything so vile as this. Mother would be so disappointed.”

“Yes, well, she was not my mother, now was she?” lashed out Loki before he averted his eyes, trying to hide his pain within a cloak of anger. He couldn’t deny that their betrayal still hurt.

“You are not fooling anyone, Loki,” his anger hardening at the disrespect to their mother’s memory. “She may not have been your birth mother – nor was she mine – but she loved us, you, as her own and acted as such. There is nothing she would not have done for you. If you do nothing else, you will honour her or I will not be responsible for my actions. You owe her that much.”

Loki stood frozen. For a moment all he could hear was ‘nor was she mine’ over and over in his head before he’d finally tuned back in and heard the rest of what Thor had said. But he still couldn’t get that one bit out of his head. ‘Nor was she mine’. Could it be true? Was Frigga not
Thor’s mother either? And what of Odin? Was he not Thor’s father either like he wasn’t Loki’s? No, that couldn’t be; Thor looked too much like Odin to not be his son… but if Frigga was not Thor’s mother who was? And why was Loki never made aware of this?

And did it really matter?

Thor was right; Frigga had been a good mother to him. She had been the one to teach him magic and about Yggdrasil, the God Tree. When he was overwhelmed with the greatness of Odin and Thor, she was always there for him to turn to. She had been the first to see his worth, even before himself, and he’d repaid her love with bitterness and anger.

Loki could never ask for her forgiveness – he didn’t deserve it – but he could at least stop taking his anger out on her. He gave Thor a slight nod in agreement before looking away, again.

Thor eyed his brother, unsure if he could trust his easy acquiesce, but decided not to question it. He’d seen the guilt flash across Loki’s face when he’d mentioned their mother and while he didn’t profess to know the reason for it, he figured it probably had something to do with the fact Loki was locked up at the time of her death and therefore, was unable to go to her aid. He remembered the way he’d found Loki in his cell after the invasion of the palace and knew that, despite what he said, their mother’s passing had hit Loki hard.

Thor wouldn’t be surprised if Loki didn’t hold some anger at Odin and him, as well, seeing as it was them who had locked him up.

Not that Loki didn’t deserve to be put in that cell; his brother just had a special talent for blaming others for his misfortunes. Usually him or Odin.

“What have you done to Father?” he asked, hoping that Loki’s cooperative mood would continue for a little longer.

“I haven’t done anything to him,” replied Loki, face a blank mask.

“I may not know much about magic, but even I can see his rest is unnatural, brother. Why have you done this?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, brother. I told you I’m only out to protect him.”

“Enough, Loki!” roared Thor; Loki not being the only one who jumped at his unexpected roar.

“Stop with the lies and just tell us so Father can return to his throne. He is the All-Father, every moment he is not where he belongs is a moment closer to a war between the realms. Is that what you want?”

Loki glared at him then. He didn’t think Thor really wanted his honest answer to that question and truthfully it didn’t matter, none of this was going according to his plan. If only Thor had remained on Sakaar for just a little longer… He figured he could give him something though. It’s not like he owed her any allegiance and them knowing would not aid them in their efforts. Or so he assumed.

“While I hate to interrupt this family discussion,” began Strange as he clasped his hands behind him, not sounding apologetic at all, “and while I find your daddy issues to be rather on the conventional side I do think your solution for them to be quite intriguing.” Stephen shrugged at both the arched brow he received from Loki and the varying looks of incredulousness from some of the others. He absently noted that Stark only rolled his eyes at him with a look of exasperation on his handsome face. “Not that I’m saying I condone it, but I can admire the spell work. I can
also tell that it is not your work and I feel compelled to tell you that with or without your assistance I will break the enchantment and wake the king up. It would go much faster if you gave me something to go on though.”

“What do you mean that it’s not his work? Are you saying Loki isn’t the one behind this?” asked Bruce, a questioning look crossing his face as the green glow receded from his eyes.

“I mean exactly that; the magical signature surrounding the king does not belong to him. Anything else is not for me to say,” replied Strange as he looked back at Loki.

“What he’s saying is what we already suspected; Kylo Ren over there didn’t do this alone,” clarified Tony, his gaze still trained on the other Asgardian. None of this explained why the trickster god was there, though. Tony had the sinking suspicion that whatever had brought him here it wasn’t part of the dark haired god’s plan. He was willing to bet his armor that the god had no idea how to break the spell on Odin any more than they did.

Loki ignored Stark as he gave the unknown sorcerer beside him an appraising look. He’d already figured the man was powerful having witnessed him open portals a few times already, which was not an easy feat, but he did not think he was that powerful that he could detect Loki’s magical signature. Things were starting to get interesting…

“Loki?” asked Thor in another bid to get his brother to tell them something.

“Amora,” replied Loki with an eye roll, nearly at the same time.

“What?”

He sighed. He hoped this wasn’t going to come back and bite him later. Amora would not take kindly to him giving her up. Not that he cared over much. He was curious to see what they’d do with the information. “I said Amora.”

Thor froze in disbelief as he stared at his brother, mentally willing him to take what he’d said back.

“I don’t suppose there’s another Amora running around both Earth and Asgard who’s not also known as The Enchantress?” asked Strange with absolutely no hope in his voice. He sighed to himself at the silence he received in answer as the cloak gave an irritated snap in the air behind him. “I didn’t think so. Well this is wonderful.”

“You know her?” asked Loki, surprised. Amora wasn’t one to associate with people she considered beneath her – and most of the people of Midgard fit that description.

“She’s on my list,” he replied with a shrug; whether that answered Loki’s question… Strange wasn’t really concerned. “That would explain why I don’t recognize the magic on the king though. The Enchantress is very adept at the ancient magic of the Norn’s, which cannot be found here. I must go.”

“What? Where?” asked Tony, surprised. “I thought you said you can do this.”

“I can and I will, but first I must find out exactly what I’m dealing with here,” replied Stephen as he waved his hand to open a portal. “Norn magic is very old and is not often what it appears to be. If I make one wrong step I could harm the king or even kill him. I must go to the source, but first I must stop at the Sanctum. I will return as soon as I can.”

And with that he step through the portal and was gone, leaving a bunch of confused superheroes behind him.
“You don’t think he’s going to go find this Amora person, do you?” asked Bruce, still staring at the spot where the portal had opened and closed. “If she’s as powerful as this all makes her seem… would going to her really be wise?”

“Amora is not one to be trifled with,” said Loki as he eyed them all. “There are only two things she cares about; power and more power.”

“We know the type,” said Natasha with a pointed look as she kept her weapon trained on him.

“Careful, that sounded almost like admiration,” said Bruce, his focus back on him. “I might get the idea you’re not here to help us and that could make me angry. As I recall, you don’t like me when I’m angry.”

“Now, now, that’s not necessary,” he smiled, putting his hands in the air in a sign of surrender. “We’re all friends here, right?”

“There are many things I’d call you, man, but that’s not one of them,” frowned Rhodey. “I don’t even know you and I’m not eager to change that.”

Loki looked him up and down then slowly smiled. “No, I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure. And you are…?”

Rhodey arched a brow as he got the sudden urge to hide behind something or someone. That… was not a look he liked to have aimed at him, he thought, as he exchanged a horrified look with Tony. “I have no name and it wouldn’t have been a pleasure to meet me.”

“Oh I highly doubt that – on both counts, but that’s alright I think I can think of one for you,” grinned Loki, not deterred at all. He wasn’t keen on the contraptions on the other man’s legs, but he could work around them… or just fix the problem and get rid of them altogether. Either way, the metal wouldn’t hinder any plans he could make with the beautiful specimen before him.

Rhodey stiffened then nearly cried from joy when Thor moved and took Loki’s attention away from him.

“Loki! You allowed Amora to use her magic on Father when you know very well what she is capable of?” questioned Thor, voice alarmingly quiet. “Yet you stand before me now and not a moment ago claiming to be here for his protection? You must truly think me a fool, brother.”

Loki thought it better not to comment on that last part, especially now when his power was still not at full strength. It was difficult enough fighting Thor when his power was at full, the way his power was now it would be near impossible. And he couldn’t forget the multiple weapons that were still trained on him.

Not to mention an enraged Hulk.

“Can we focus here, please?” spoke up Natasha, suddenly. They were getting off track and she, personally, was tired of it. “Thor you can have it out with Loki later, on your own time – maybe after Strange wakes up your father?” She turned her gaze back to Loki then, but didn’t miss Thor’s nod of agreement. “Your distraction methods are almost as good as my own, but we have more important things to do than cater to your games, so let’s cut the bullshit before you decide to hit on Kisa next and you just tell us one thing; what are you protecting Odin from?”

Loki arched a brow at the redhead. He’d forgotten how cunning the female assassin was; if he’d been able to take her instead of the bird when he’d tried conquering Midgard before he’d probably have won…. Or at least come a lot closer to winning than he did. He figured since she’d figured
out his game, he could reward her with an answer to her question. Sort of.

And who was Kisa? He looked around and it took less than a moment for him to find the only other female in the room he’d never seen before. He gave the male with the red face a cursory look before he turned an appreciative look at the small woman, both for the power he sensed from her as well as her beauty. There was also something slightly familiar about her…

“Not a what, but a whom,” he replied, never taking his eyes away from the lavender gaze meeting his. “And I don’t know.” He’d wait to see what they could figure out before he’d offer any more help.

Natasha and Kisa both arched a brow, knowing the lying god knew more than he let on. Natasha also knew it would be a waste of time trying to question him further; Loki had no intention of telling them anything more. At least not right now.

“Fine,” she nodded. “If you don’t intend to be of any help than you can leave now.” She watched as he bristled and looked to both Thor and Tony at the obvious dismissal from her and then frowned when he realized neither of the men was going to oppose her.

“As you wish,” Loki said as he bowed mockingly towards her. His eyes flicked once more to Kisa before they glowed a bright green and they were looking at the dog once more.

Silently they all watched him slink away towards the back of the shop, probably to return to his father’s bedside, before they all exchanged questioning looks with varying degrees of concern.

“Friday, keep an eye on him and make sure he touches nothing,” spoke Tony as he put his gauntlet away. He waited for his A.I.’s agreement and watched as the lasers above them disappeared back into the ceiling before turning to Natasha, whom he noted had already holstered her weapon. “You don’t really believe that crap about protecting his father do you? There are better ways to protect someone then putting them in a coma.”

“His method does seem to have become counter-productive to his goal, if that be the case,” observed Vision, speaking for the first time.

Natasha rolled her eyes as she saw Rhodey nodding at her from the other side of Tony. She didn’t expect Tony or the others to see Loki the way she did. They didn’t deal in subterfuge and lies the ways she did, so they wouldn’t always recognize the signs. Especially against someone as good at lying as Loki was.

“Of course not,” she replied as she crossed her arms in front of her. “One thing I learned about Loki from our last encounter with him is that he is a very good liar.” She smirked at Thor’s silent nod of agreement. “Lying is like an art for him and he’s a master at it, but I’ve been trained to be even better and – more importantly – to recognize a lie when I see it. Do you know the best way to lie is to mix just enough truth in that it throws your opponent off?”

Tony nodded. He knew that. Why did she think his masks worked so well? They all had a bit of who Tony really was in them; just enough truth that no one asked questions or ever thought to try to look deeper. By the time he was 14 years old he’d become a master at it and he could count on one hand the number of people who’d bothered to try to see more. His honey-bear had been the first and a handful of years later, Pepper, but even she hadn’t at first.

And if he recalled correctly, his masks had worked on Natasha as well, so she should know that he knew quite a bit about lying.
“So why aren’t we questioning him more?” asked Rhodey, not that he minded the other Asgardian leaving the room.

“Because he wasn’t going to tell us anything more,” she replied, “but we have somewhere to start.”

“We do?” asked Bruce as he exchanged confused looks with Tony, Thor and Rhodey. He’d be the first to admit that he had no idea what the hell was going on. He noted that Kisa, who’d remained silent through it all, didn’t look confused at all and seemed to be on the same page as Natasha.

“Where?”

“With Odin,” she shrugged. “He wasn’t lying about wanting to protect his father,” she paused and held up a hand when she saw both Thor and Tony open their mouths, probably to contradict her. “I’m not saying that’s why he put this spell on him, whatever it is, or why he pretended to be Odin and sit the throne. That’s all Loki. But something or someone has him running scared – haven’t any of you wondered why he’s hiding out as a dog? It’s not to hide from us, obviously. No. Whatever is going on he believes Odin is needed to stop it, but right now Odin is vulnerable and defenseless. I think that’s what he meant when he said he’s protecting him; whoever he’s hiding from he’s hiding his father from them, too.”

Thor frowned. That actually made a sad kind of sense and he knew Loki would also be feeling guilty because his schemes were what put their father in a defenseless position.

“He allowed Heimdall to see him,” said Thor, thoughtfully, something finally making sense with him. “I had wondered… Sadly, I know I was not suspicious at all and I’m pretty sure no one else on Asgard had suspected. Had mother still been alive, she no doubt would have noticed, but events conspired to help Loki’s deception. He could have continued this ruse forever, but my brother needs us.”

“He needed you,” spoke up Kisa for the first time. They all turned to look at her then. “Your brother does not have the power to wake Odin, but he knew you would stop at nothing to find a way and that you have great friends with the power to help you. Another thing he lacks. The power of the All-Father will be needed, but that also makes your father a target.”

“Kisa?”

“I am concerned, Anthony,” she admitted, looking at him for a moment then turning to the rest. “King Odin, All-Father, is a formidable opponent and not one to take lightly. He has kept peace in the Nine Realms longer than any other monarch before him and that is largely due to the fact that many are not eager to stand against him or his son, Mjolnir’s chosen. Someone who is willing to go against the combined might of Odin and Thor has to either be very powerful… or very foolish.”

“She makes a great point,” nodded Thor. “What are the possibilities that whoever my brother is hiding from and the threat I have been chasing and have come to warn you all of are two separate entities? Midgard has made a name for itself; many now know there are formidable powers here willing to go to great lengths to protect this planet and they will and have come to test that power, but this feels like something more. Either way Midgard is in their path.”

“Why do I get the feeling we’re going to need all hands on deck for this?” said Rhodey, looking to Tony with a frown.

“Because we are,” answered Tony, mind moving at a hundred miles a minute. “The Avengers – old and new – will not be enough for this, but I already guessed that when Thor showed up looking troubled and needing S.H.I.E.L.D as well as us.” Tony crossed one arm over his chest and rested his other elbow on that arm and used his free hand to pluck thoughtfully at the hairs on his chin.
“We don’t need to worry about that for now; I’m already working on it. What we need to know is who the hell this is that’s coming here and, preferably, when. I think it’s time for all cards to be placed on the table, Big Guy,” he added as he looked at Thor.

Thor blinked. “Cards? I do not have any cards for your table. Should I have brought some?”

“No, Thor. What Tony means is it’s time for you to tell us why you came here,” clarified Bruce with a reluctant smile.

Thor nodded then in understanding. “Of course, my friend,” he agreed. “How quickly can you get Director Fury here?” He still wanted to tell everyone at one time.

“Friday?”

“Director Fury is currently off the grid, boss. I have put a call into his personal line as well as to his alternate and to Agent Hill. Agent Hill has confirmed that she can return to the tower later this afternoon, but does not believe Director Fury will be available before tomorrow morning.”

That wasn’t good enough for Tony. “Find him, Friday. I don’t care where he is; get him on the secure line.”

“Code 47, boss?”

Tony thought about it for a moment then sighed. “Yeah, tell him Code 47 is in effect.”

“What’s Code 47?” asked Bruce. He noticed that Natasha, Rhodey, Vision and Kisa all seemed to be in agreement with Tony on whatever it was.

“It’s a new addition to the Sokovia Accords,” replied Tony, frowning. “It means planetary security is potentially at risk. All who signed the Accords will be put on notice.”

Bruce nodded. “Isn’t that a little premature at this time?”

“Probably, but that’s the problem; we don’t know when this… enemy is going to attack and if we wait until we know it may be too late for us to sufficiently be prepared. I say better to prepare too early then to be too late.”

“Besides, Code 47 is just a warning of a potential danger to the planet so certain safety measures will be activated for the civilians. Nothing else will be done until the danger can be reasonably confirmed,” added Natasha.

“Well until Strange can wake the King and I can get everyone here we have to focus on the threats that are here.”

“Right. Like who were those people that tried to kill you earlier,” said Rhodey. “Why you always have to offend the crazy occults, Tones? Why can’t they ever be the type of groups that like to hold hands and sing and bake cupcakes? I like cupcakes.”

“It’s the sarcasm, they never understand the sarcasm.”

“Right, that’s what it is,” said Natasha, hiding her smile.

“We also need to find out who ordered the surgery on the king,” said Bruce, smiling at their banter.

“There was an image on the robes of those people who attacked us,” said Kisa, thoughtfully. “Do
you think your Agent Hill has learned anything of value yet from the men she took for questioning?"

“It’s possible,” replied Tony with a shrug then he grinned as he added, “If not, we can always let Nat have a crack at them.”

Natasha smirked, but said nothing.

“Fry, bring up an image for me,” he waited for the image to pop up in the air in front of him. “Have we found any matches?”

“No matches yet, boss, but the search is still in progress. It’s unexpected how many individuals and groups prefer to identify themselves with an image and not just a name. A rather peculiar trend.”

Tony grinned. “It’s okay to call humans weird, Fry.” JARVIS use to say something similar all the time – of course, he use to also lump Tony in with them.

“I did not wish to offend present company,” replied FRIDAY, a suspicious note in her voice.

Tony narrowed his eyes, but looked at Natasha and Kisa. “She’s referring to you two, you know.”

“Yes, because Iron Man can’t be identified by just a symbol,” replied Natasha as Kisa raised an eyebrow at him.

“Sorry, Tony, but I think Colonel Rhodes and I are the only ones present who can even remotely be excluded from that group,” said Bruce with a grin.

Tony lowered his head in mock defeat. “I thought I removed your ability to insult me from your programming.” He didn’t, of course. He would never hinder his creation’s ability to say what she thought. He didn’t do it with JARVIS and he wouldn’t do it with FRIDAY. She was meant to grow and learn.

“You do threaten to almost daily, boss,” she replied and he could almost hear the cheek in her voice.

“Right. Remind me to do that.”

“Of course, boss.” They both knew she would do no such thing.

“Alright, if we’re done here, I’m going to go make a few calls and see what I can find out about a certain doctor,” said Rhodey, turning to head for the door.

“That’s fine,” Tony nodded. “This is Strange’s show now. I’ll let you all know if something changes.”

“I’ll see what I can find out from Maria,” said Natasha before she also turned to leave. She sent Bruce a look over her soldier as she made her way to the elevator behind Rhody.

Bruce just shrugged as he moved to follow her. “Send me the codes and specs on the B.A.R.F programme. I get the feeling our time to get those changes done have just be drastically shortened.”

Tony grinned; glad that he didn’t have to be the one to bring it up. Bruce had always had a knack for understanding him when they worked in the lab together. It was good to have his science bro
“I must check in with Asgard,” said Thor as he, too, headed for the door. “Then I will return to sit vigil over my father.”

Tony watched them all leave until the elevator doors closed, blocking his view of them before he turned his gaze to the last two people left in the shop with him.

“And what about you?”

“I have nowhere else I need to be,” replied Kisa with a shrug.

“Nor do I,” added Vision.

“How good are you on a computer?” he asked Kisa. He figured if they were going to stick around he may as well put them both to work. And maybe he’d even get a chance to talk to Kisa about some things as well.

“I am proficient,” she nodded. “What is it you need me to do?”

“Work with FRIDAY and see if you can find out who our mystery person is at Walter Reed and also look up anything you can find on that nurse,” he instructed before he turned to Vision.

“Vision you think you could assist Bruce with the modifications to the B.A.R.F programme for Barnes? I’ll send over everything you’ll need to get started then join you guys once I finish here.”

“I can assist Dr. Banner in this task,” replied Vision with a nod. “Are you thinking to inform King T’Challa of these new developments and requesting he come here with Barnes at the soonest?”

“I am,” replied Tony as he waved a hand in the air to bring up a computer screen.

“What name am I searching for?” asked Kisa once they were silent. Both Vision and Tony gave her a questioning look. “The nurse. What is her name?”

Tony opened his mouth to reply only to realize a moment later he didn’t have an answer. He and Kisa both turned to look at Vision then.

“She did not introduce herself, but her name tag stated her name as being Gwen Poole with an ‘e’ at the end.”

“Thank you,” said Kisa with a nod as she turned back to the computer screen FRIDAY had brought up for her. She found the virtual keyboard to be quite intriguing to maneuver and found it fascinating to know her Anthony was the one to create it.

Vision nodded to them both before levitating to the ceiling and phasing through.

“Fry, open a secure line to Wakanda. Use the king’s direct number,” said Tony as he began a background check on a Dr. Fujikawa working at Walter Reed.

“Of course, boss. Also you should know that I have located Director Fury, boss, and have informed him that his presence is requested at the Tower ASAP. I am currently awaiting his reply. Also, young Peter Parker has just arrived and is in the elevator on his way to the workshop.”

Tony arched a brow at the mention of Peter, but nodded as he heard the phone line begin to ring.

“Keep me posted on Nick, Fry.”
Steve and the others sat around the living room area, having moved from the kitchen and dining area after putting what little of the stew that was left away and loading the dish washer. Laura had left to get the children from Tony’s after he’d filled them all in on what he’d learned earlier and he could tell that they all felt some type a way about being left out, except for Wanda, who was being very careful to keep whatever she was thinking and feeling to herself.

“I get that, you know, we’re on this probation thing, but Thor didn’t even tell us his father was missing and are he and Bruce even allowed to be doing… whatever they’re doing?” Clint asked, because it was obvious that the plan Steve had known about had recently changed.

“Dude, do you really think the U.N or whoever could stop Thor if he came here to get his father?” asked Sam with an incredulous look. “And no one wants to make Dr. Banner angry.”

Clint gave a weird little nod and shrug motion, because he could neither deny nor question that logic. He still couldn’t help feeling a little left out by the others. And why did Thor go to Tony and not Steve? Sure Tony was the one with the money and the skills to find someone fast, but Steve could…. Steve could totally kick the ass of the bad guy. Okay, so he could see why Thor went to Tony, but he could have still told the rest of them what was going on. They’d have helped. As much as they could help, granted, but there was no telling what kind of trouble they were getting into if they were really going to try to infiltrate a Military Medical Center. Natasha, at least, should know better. Wait. No, what was he thinking? Natasha would definitely do something like that, but Rhodes should at least know better.

“I’m still trying to figure out how that guy got his cape to move that way,” said Scott, to no one in particular.

“Magic,” replied Sam, smirking at his own joke.

“I don’t believe in magic,” said Scott with a shake of his head.

Steve stared at him as Wanda, who was sitting next to Scott on the big couch, turned to give him a significant look.

Scott turned to her then and frowned. “Oh yeah.”

Wanda just arched a brow then rolled her eyes, but didn’t reply.

“You think they will try to get the king out now?” asked Clint.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Strange definitely looked to be in a hurry,” replied Steve. “I guess it all depends on what he was so worried about.”

“You realize what will happen to them if they’re caught, right?” asked Sam, concern written all over his face. “And I’m not talking about the Accords.”

“Tony will make sure nothing happens,” said Steve, confidently. He was surprised by how much he meant that. He was certain Tony would make sure nothing bad happened to the rest on the off chance they were caught.

Clint sat up then. He’d been leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, but he couldn’t take this anymore. Sam, seeming to sense the tension coming off the other man, turned his attention to Clint with a concerned look.
“Clint, man, you alright?”

Clint shook his head, but kept his eyes on Steve. Part of him didn’t want to say anything, because he didn’t want to sound like he was trying to place his responsibility on Steve, but another, larger part just couldn’t not say something.

“What the hell, Steve?” Clint exclaimed, unable to hold back. “You sure have an awful lot of faith in a man you were ready to practically fight to the death not even a year ago.”

“Clint–” tried Sam, but Clint only gave him a fleeting glance as he cut his hand through the air, stopping him, as he stood up.

“No, Sam, this needs to be said and someone needs to fucking say it, already,” yelled Clint. “We followed him; I followed him. I chose to leave my family to come help him because he asked me to, because he said Tony and the Accords were wrong and I agreed with him and now he wants to sit there and spout out all this faith he has? Look at us, man! We’re now thinking of signing the very thing we were all so sure was wrong – Wanda already has – and fuck me, the world’s not ending. If he believes so much in Tony why the hell couldn’t he just talk this shit out back then? My fucking wife is ready to leave me, my children are having a hard time trusting me and the only one who can talk them into giving me half a chance is the same man I called a fucking traitor. Oh and let’s not forget, he also saved our god damn lives and has probably known where we were fucking hiding before we even got there, because he’s Tony fucking Stark! Of course, he knew!”

“Clint, you need to calm down,” said Wanda while Steve, Sam and Scott just stared at the other man. None of them had ever seen Clint this angry before. Usually when Clint was mad he was quiet and often isolated himself until he could get his head right. He was never one to yell. This was new territory for all of them and none of them knew how to handle it.

“No, Wanda, I don’t need to calm down,” he replied as he put his hands up to keep her back. “And you’re no better than he is. You were right, though, this was nothing but a choice between Tony and Steve and while we were busy choosing him,” he points a finger at Steve. “He was choosing Barnes.”

“That is not what I said,” frowned Wanda.

“That’s not true, Clint,” said Steve at the same time as he, also, stood.

Clint looked between them both, eyebrows raised. “Isn’t it?”

“Everything alright in here?” asked Natasha from the hall entrance.

Everyone turned to look towards the new voice in surprise. No one had heard her or Bruce enter the room, much less even hear the arrival of the elevator.

“Oh, you know, the usual,” replied Scott from his seat, the only one in the room still sitting. “Clint’s just saying what everyone has thought, at least once.” When he turned back to the others his eyes widened at the look Steve was sending him. “Sorry, Cap. I just call ‘em as I see ‘em.”

“Really?” said Natasha as she looked at them all, but not really out for a reply from any of them. Her and Bruce exchanged knowing looks before they both turned back to the room. “Do tell?”

“You can say I told you so, Tasha,” said Clint, shaking his head. “I should have figured something wasn’t right when it wasn’t you who called me. But Cap said he needed me and that Tony was keeping Wanda prisoner and you were for the Accords… I knew why you were and I understood that, but I saw that registration part and I couldn’t let them put my family in danger. And besides, I
wasn’t going to play puppet for anyone else ever again.”

Natasha stared at him for a moment then nodded. “I know. But you were retired, Clint. You wouldn’t have been required to sign or register your family even had the registration part still remained in effect. You’re human and not a mutant or enhanced in any way.”

Clint blinked. He hadn’t thought about that. Definitely, not at the time anyway. He’d just been so mad at the government even trying to put a leash on them – though he wasn’t an Avenger at the time – that he’d been almost relieved when he’d got the call. He’d been so proud that Steve wasn’t going to let that happen that he didn’t even think how out of character it was for Steve, of all people, to take his stand on the Accords to such an extreme.

That was more Tony’s style if you asked, Clint.

He would have expected Tony to be the one to fight the system, hard, and refuse to sign. Steve was more like the one who would want to talk and negotiate to find some way that they can all live peacefully with the Accords.

That should have been his second clue.

By the time he’d finally realized that Steve’s true motivation was protecting his friend it was too late – they’d already been left behind at that airport to be caught by Ross. Not that he’d minded that at the time, because he’d known as long as Steve was free he’d never leave them all locked up and they had all agreed to give Barnes and Steve the time they needed to flee. Now, he knew that if it wasn’t for Tony, Steve would have probably ended up in a cell with them or at least not have been able to get all of them out.

“My mistake was in believing this was just us trying to stop the government and I’d assumed proving Barnes’ innocence was a part of that, but I was wrong. It had stopped being about the Accords long before you called me and I didn’t see it because I wanted to help Wanda. I felt I owed her that.”

“You do not owe me, Clint,” said Wanda, shaking her head. “You have never owed me. My brother’s death was never your fault and I have never blamed you.”

Clint just looked at her. This was a woman who has been living most her life blaming someone else and she wanted him to believe that she didn’t blame him? Blaming others was all Wanda seemed to know how to do, so even if she wasn’t blaming him he knew she was blaming Tony.

“You know what I find ironic? Here I am thinking I’m helping a friend by fighting my best friend and all you’re doing is damning all your friends to help your best friend and we, your friends, helped you do it,” he said to Steve with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“That’s not what irony means,” muttered Natasha, crossing her arms.

“Hypocrisy at best,” nodded Bruce, suppressing his grin.

“Aww come on, Tasha, that’s so not the point here,” exclaimed Clint, looking at them. “I was being all dramatic and going for the kill shot. Steve was going to spill his guts any minute now.”

“What?” said Steve, incredulous. “You didn’t mean any of that?”

“Oh, I meant it,” shrugged Clint. “I’m just not mad at you about it anymore. You played us, man. You may not have made our choices for us, but you allowed us to choose you knowing you weren’t doing any of this for us.”
“Clint…” sighed Sam, pinching the bridge of his nose. His life wasn’t nearly this complicated before he met Steve.

“Say what you want Sam, but you know I’m right; we were played.”

“Saying that implies intent, man, and you know Steve. He’d never do anything like that intentionally.”

“What’s knowing have to do with anything?” asked Clint in disbelief. “He knows Tony and that didn’t stop him. All I’m saying is Steve was going to do anything to protect Barnes and the Accords had nothing to do with it.”

“I still didn’t agree with the Accords, Clint. I didn’t lie about that. I think we are capable of managing ourselves, but I can admit I do see where the need for oversite and accountability is necessary.”

“Oh we definitely need some oversite and accountability; we destroy a lot of shit fighting the enemy and a lot of people get hurt or die who shouldn’t,” he replied as he stared back at Steve. “But I bet there was a time or two when you were willing to sign, to try it Tony’s way. I don’t know Tony half as well as you do, but even I know that with his history he isn’t the type of guy to side with the government blindly. And he’s no idiot, so he probably saw this shit coming a mile away.”

Natasha just raised an eyebrow at him. Clint was not a dumb guy, but he was also not the one to show just how well he understood what was happening with the people around him. He was a great observer and understood the human psyche a lot better than most; two things that made a great spy. And Clint had always been one of the best spies. He was one of two men to ever come close to killing her… and Natasha knows the reason she survived him had nothing to do with her skills and everything to do with Clint.

“You did a lot of talking about honesty and together, that as long as we were together we could do anything, but when the chips were down you were the first to forget that. Now maybe that was because the team wasn’t what it used to be, maybe you figured we abandoned you first – or maybe you would have left us no matter what, who’s to say? What I know is that I don’t blame you for calling me – maybe you shouldn’t have had to – but I do think you made some fucked up choices, man, and I do think you let me believe some things that weren’t exactly true, because you needed me on your side.”

“There were no sides, Clint. I wasn’t trying to pit us against one another.”

“It may not have been your goal, Cap, but there were definitely sides,” he replied with a disbelieving look. Was Steve really that naïve or was he being deliberately obtuse? “Have you forgotten Leipzig? We fought each other, Steve! Now that may not have meant much to Sam, Wanda and Scott, but you and I? Nat and Tony? Hell, even Vision. We all still hear JARVIS whenever he speaks; I know I do. They were family and we fought them like they were HYDRA spawn. I fought my best friend, the aunt and godmother to my children!”

“Stark didn’t-” began Wanda.

“No,” said Clint, turning quickly to her and cutting her off. There was nothing she had to say that he wanted to hear. “You don’t get to speak. I’ve heard all I ever want to hear from you. I let my guilt rule my head for the first time and it came back to bite me in the ass. I won’t make that mistake twice.”
“Sam, you still can’t even look Rhodes in the eye,” he said, turning back to look at Sam then Steve. “This was all bullshit. I don’t blame you for my choices, but I do blame you for allowing me to make the wrong ones.” He waited a moment then shrugged and added, “But we can’t go back, so being mad at you isn’t going to do me any good.”

“For what it’s worth, Clint, I’m sorry I called you and asked for your help. I shouldn’t have.”

Clint nodded as he watched him silently for a moment. “You’d have made a good spy, Cap. You’re always very careful in how you word things, much like me and Nat, only she often chooses not to say anything at all. It makes us very good at hearing what’s not being said.”

Steve just stared back at him, neither confirming nor denying Clint’s observation. People often thought Steve to be a little on the simple side because he was always the optimistic one, the one who chose to believe in the good in almost everyone. They forget that Steve lived most of his younger years on the street or maybe they didn’t know that about him, maybe it was left out the history books; either way a lot tended to think he was a blond haired, blue eyed idiot and he wasn’t ashamed to admit that he often used that erroneous belief to his advantage.

It was a good strategy when he was tiny and sickly and often getting into trouble. It didn’t keep him from getting his ass handed to him whenever he felt the need to pick a fight with someone, but it did help him secure food and cheap lodgings for himself and Bucky when necessary. But for every forty or fifty people who fell for his wholesome boy smile there would be one to see him for the little shit he was and have no trouble calling him on it. His mom, of course, had been the first; Bucky had been the second – well actually, Mrs. Wallace living down the hall from them in 3C had been the second, but he didn’t count her, usually, because he was still of the mind that she was one of the Fey or the Unseelie from the stories his mom used to tell him as a child.

Now Clint seemed to have joined that very small group of people; leaving Thor to be the last of their original group to do so – though he was sure Thor wasn’t half as clueless as he liked to portray himself. He suspected the Asgardian got a sick kind of kick out of making people explain the most mundane things to him.

“I only came here to tell you all we have a meet set up with Fury for tomorrow,” said Natasha, bringing Steve out of his thoughts. “You will all be expected to decide whether you will sign the Accords or not then.” She looked directly at Steve then. “Steve, you should know that T’challa will be at this meeting and he is most likely bringing Barnes with him.”

Steve blinked. Bucky wasn’t supposed to be there until the following Monday though, the last he spoke to the king. Why had things changed? “Why are they coming now? When I spoke to T’challa he said they wouldn’t be here until the following Monday.”

She nodded. “Things have changed, somethings come up and T’challa’s presence is required.”

“What’s come up?”

“You’ll find out at the meeting.”

“Why can’t you tell us now?” he asked with a frown. “Is this about Thor and his father?”

“Speaking of that,” cut in Clint, turning towards her. “Why didn’t you guys tell us what was going on? We could have helped.”

“How could you have helped?” she asked, returning his look. “None of you are Avengers now and none of you are allowed to do anything without repercussions. Thor came back looking for the
Avengers help, but decided to go to Tony when he realized the Avengers he remembered weren’t available.”

“You told Bruce I bet, but he hasn’t signed.”

“No, Thor told Bruce,” she replied with an arched brow. “And what are we, five? You want to complain? Go to Thor.”

“Have you guys at least found Thor’s father?” cut in Steve before they could get any further. Natasha and Clint could go on for a while if you let them. He figured he’d cut them off and ask another question as it was obvious his other question was not going to be answered.

“We have,” she replied as Bruce nodded from beside her. She decided not to let them know that the king was currently in the building. For some reason, she had the feeling the less people who knew about the king’s whereabouts the better; not that she didn’t trust them. She just felt she needed to keep it quiet for now.

Steve gave her look, but didn’t ask any more questions. He had a feeling nothing he asked would get a straight answer anyway, so figured he may as well hold everything until tomorrow.

Clint frowned, knowing there was more she wasn’t saying, but didn’t say anything. He knew Natasha and if she didn’t want to talk nothing short of torture was going to make her. And even that wasn’t a guarantee you was going to get the truth.

“Well then, I’m going to go find my son and see if he still wants to show me his archery,” said Clint with a shrug. There was nothing more for him to do there. “I’ll see you all later or tomorrow, whichever comes first.”

Sam watched his friend leave and wondered when the word “crazy” had become the norm for describing his life. He suspected the beginning could be traced back to when he met a certain blond haired, blue eyed white boy who reminded him too much of himself. Ever since Bucky was accused of that bombing that started this shit storm he kept asking himself if Riley had suddenly shown up in his life, alive, and needed help would Sam give up the life and family he’d had to help him? And no matter how long he thought about it he couldn’t definitively answer the question. He knew he would have given his life to save Riley – almost had – but he couldn’t say if he would willingly risk the lives of other people he loved for him, like his mom or his sister.

He wasn’t sure what that said about him or his relationship with Riley... or maybe it didn’t say anything. Maybe it just wasn’t an equal comparison because everyone in Steve’s made family, including Sam, were trained to protect themselves where his mother and sister weren’t. But even with that change in mind he couldn’t say he’d have risked them, even trained, without them knowing of the risk.

Then he asked himself if he’d fought the person he loved for Riley... but he knew that wasn’t a fair question because he was positive, even now, that Steve was blind to the extent of his feelings for Tony. He knew all Steve had wanted was to save Bucky, to not fail like he did before and that was something Sam could understand, something he wanted to help his friend with and did.

Steve’s only mistake was believing his new friends and family wouldn’t understand that and help him, too.

More importantly, that Tony wouldn’t.

And that was where everything went wrong. Sam wasn’t there to witness the friendship between
Steve and Tony, but what little he did see seemed to be pretty solid to him. He knew from Steve that they’d had a pretty rocky start and during the time they’d first found out Bucky was alive and was the Winter Soldier their friendship was still new, so he could understand why Steve wouldn’t have wanted to push that.

But Sam also remembered the look on Steve’s face when Sitwell mentioned Tony as being one of the targets of Insight. Steve had quickly hidden it, but the devastation that had been there couldn’t be denied. At the time, Sam had thought of it just as a friend afraid for another friend – after all Steve had shown concern for Dr. Banner too, when he was mentioned – but when he looked back on it after beginning to suspect Steve cared a little more about Tony’s opinion than the norm he couldn’t help but wonder.

Now that he was certain though, he could only imagine how difficult all this must have been for Steve. A Catholic, Irish-American white boy from the 40s, who was more than likely taught you don’t have such feelings for the same sex and if you do you damn sure don’t act on them.

Steve was courageous, driven, loyal, willful and stubborn as hell. If he’d found some guy he cared about and wanted to be with that way and who wanted to be with him he wouldn’t let a damn thing stand in his way. So while it would have left someone like Steve conflicted for a while there was no doubt as to what and who he would choose in the end.

Steve was also opinionated, self-righteous, somewhat hypocritical, slightly judgmental and stubborn as hell – it deserved being mentioned twice. But with his self-effacing ways, big heart and rather awe inspiring ability to bring out the best in almost anyone it made for a rather great leader and soldier. All those great traits even made for a great brother or a lover and husband – if occasionally annoying – but could make it very difficult for one who’s loved ones are feuding.

He couldn’t even imagine the added complication of not even realizing your feelings for one of the parties.

Suddenly Sam sighed and came out of his thoughts. He noticed while he was wool-gathering, as his mama liked to say, that both Bruce and Natasha had left leaving him with Steve, Scott and Wanda.

He caught Steve giving him a knowing look and grinned, sheepishly.

“Back with us now?” asked Steve, grinning back.

Sam shrugged, not wanting to go into what he’d been thinking about. “What I miss?”

“When did you check out?”

“I saw Clint leave…”

“Then you didn’t miss much. Natasha only told us she’d let us know a time for the meeting once it was confirmed then her and Bruce left. We were just discussing what the meeting could be about.”

“I’m sure it can’t be good if Fury is coming,” Sam replied then shrugged when the others looked at him. “What? You really think something good would bring the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D to us? No. This has ‘world destruction’ written all over it.”

“You really think it’s that bad?” asked Scott?

“You’ve never met Nick Fury, huh?”
“Nor have I,” chimed in Wanda as Scott shook his head in the negative.

“Well you should be glad of that,” said Sam as he turned his gaze to her. “The man knows everything and I’m betting he’s not your biggest fan right now. I’ve been waiting for him to show up and chew us out over all this.”

“You are afraid of a little chewing out?” she asked raising a skeptical eyebrow.

Sam raised his brows as he returned her look with a dead one of his own then turned to Steve. “Steve should we be afraid?”

“Yeah,” nodded Steve with a grimace. “I’m pretty certain Fury knows how to kill all of us and get rid of the evidence without anyone ever finding out, serum or no serum.”

“Who exactly is this guy?” asked Scott, eyes wide with apprehension.

“I don’t think anyone really knows,” shrugged Sam. “I know I never want him to consider me an enemy.”

Wanda and Scott exchanged identical looks of worry.

“Cheer up, you two, Fury seems to have a bit of a soft spot for Tony,” said Steve with a smile, imagining the murderous glare Fury would aim at him if he’d heard that. “I doubt he’d kill anyone in the Tower.”

“One can only hope,” agreed Sam when the other two looked at him for confirmation. He watched as they both once again exchanged a look before making a hasty exit, promising to be at the meeting tomorrow if they didn’t see anyone again that day.

Sam and Steve watched the other two leave in silence and waited for the elevator doors to close before turning to look at each other.

“Too much?”

“Nah,” answered Sam with a shake of his head. “A healthy dose of fear would do Wanda some good and Scott has been sort of skating by since most don’t really know him. I feel bad for asking for his help now and I know he’s regretting the choices he made, but I also remember what he said to Tony when he came to the Raft to see us to find you and Barnes. He needs to learn to make choices based on his own judgements not someone else’s or off of hero-worship. Besides, nothing we told them was untrue; Fury can do all those things and more.”

“That’s true,” nodded Steve with a sigh. “I’m feeling a little optimistic though. He didn’t have us killed while in Wakanda... and I have no doubt he knew exactly where we were.”

Sam nodded, but refrained from mentioning his suspicion that Fury’s restraint had more to do with where they were and not any kind of generosity on his part. He suspected the Director just didn’t want to cause an international incident – not that he wasn’t certain the man had the ability to infiltrate the royal palace in Wakanda, kill them all and get out without leaving any trace he was ever there. The man was the Ultimate Spy.

“Of course, that could be just because he wants to kill us himself,” offered Sam with a look.

Steve stared back at him then sighed and shut his eyes. “We are so fucking screwed.”
Chapter VIII

Peter Parker grinned and tried to contain his excitement as the elevator took him to Mr. Stark’s shop inside Avenger’s Tower. He wanted to jump and do his excited buggy dance, but he was certain there were cameras in the elevator – he could see two just from doing a cursory glance around – and didn’t want his dorkiness to be on tape. Mr. Stark would never let him forget it.

He still couldn’t believe that he was allowed to come visit Tony Stark whenever he wanted, that he could call his idol his friend, too. And though he would love to say he’d come there just because he could, he was actually there to see Mr. Stark for a real reason.

That sobering thought quickly killed most of his buzz over being at the Avenger’s Tower again as he stepped off the elevator and quietly walked to the sliding glass doors that separated him from his biggest idol.

He hoped Mr. Stark wouldn’t be too mad at him and would still be willing to grant his request after he told the older man what he’d done. Hopefully the fact that he had no idea what had been going on and quickly fixed what he’d done when he learned it was Mr. Stark would make everything okay between them.

Especially because he really wanted Mr. Stark to agree to his request.

Peter entered the workshop on silent feet and immediately stopped just inside the doors. There was a very pretty black woman working at a computer at one of the desks, but he didn’t see Mr. Stark anywhere. He took another glance around and when he still didn’t see Mr. Stark he opened his mouth to call out to the lady when something from behind him and to his left made him turn instead.

He raised his brows at what he saw.

Mr. Stark was standing there with U, who seemed to be holding a fire extinguisher over his head and Mr. Stark seemed to be trying to get the extinguisher away from his creation.

“You know lurking in peoples’ doorways is rude,” said Tony, aiming a look at him from the corner of his eye before focusing back on the robot. “U, you give me that fire extinguisher right now or I promise when I ship you off to the school of my choosing I’ll tell them you are only to be used for art and music classes.”

U made this kind of whirling noise and rocked from side to side before slowly lowering the extinguisher.

“I’m blaming this on Steve; he’s the only one who has used my height against me in front of you,”
Tony said with a shake of his head as he took the extinguisher away. “We’re going to have a long
talk about when it’s appropriate to spray people – though I guess it was better than the lasers.”

Peter couldn’t quite hide his grin, but decided not to comment as he watched Tony put the
extinguisher down on a random desk and U quietly pick it up right after he turned his back.

“So what brings you by, kid? Not that I’m not happy to see you,” said Tony as he slung an arm
across Peter’s shoulders and started tugging him along with him back to the computer he was
working on before he’d had to corner U.

“Umm, I came by because I thought I should tell you something,” began Peter, scratching the back
of his head in a self-conscious display of nerves.

Tony eyed the kid, noting his sudden nervousness with a curious tilt of his head, but didn’t ask. He
figured he’d find out soon enough what was going on with him. “Okay. Tell me what?”

“I uh… I know about you hacking into Mr. Stone’s video feed and erasing the footage saved.”

Tony blinked. That wasn’t what he was expecting. “Hn. Okay. And how do you know that?”

Peter sighed. Well this was going better than he thought so far, so… “Because it was my program
keeping you from blocking the feed or finding who it belonged to.”

“I see,” actually, Tony wasn’t all that surprised. He wasn’t expecting Peter to be the one on the
other side, but he wasn’t surprised that he had the computer skills to do that. “You’ll have to tell
me how you managed to evade Fry like that, but first, Stone?”

“Oh yeah, I was sort of interning at this company called Viastone in their IT department and they
had me help with creating security programs. The camera systems at Walter Reed was one of my
assignments, but when I realized it was you that was attacking my program I quickly pulled it,
removed it from the system and left. I figured if you had a reason to be hacking them then I
probably shouldn’t be helping them. I’m sorry if I caused you any trouble, Mr. Stark.”

Tony quickly waved away his apology as he thought. “How long you been interning there?”

“About three weeks now?” Peter replied with a shrug. “It was funny, this guy just showed up at
my home saying that I was awarded a spot on his Student Intern Program, but I never applied to
any programs like that. So I decided to go and see what was really going on.”

“And did you find out?”

“Not yet. I thought he might know about, you know,” Peter made a hand gesture as he shot a
surreptitious look towards the woman at the computer. When Mr. Stark just raised a brow at him
he sighed. “You know, Mr. Stark, the whole sling whoosh thing.”

It took Tony another split second. “Oh. That. Does he? And why didn’t you just say your tight
fetish or something? What the hell is this supposed to be?” Tony asked as he poorly copied Peter’s
hand gesture from a moment ago.

“That is not what I did and it’s supposed to be a spider and I don’t have a tights fetish. I’ll have
you know what I made wasn’t nearly as tight as what you made for me,” replied Peter with a roll of
his eyes. “And I don’t think so. He hasn’t shown any indication that he knows anyway. I’m
guessing it’s something else, but I won’t be finding out now.”

“Sure, teenage dream,” said Tony, crossing his arms. “And why not? You’re an intern, which
means you’re not getting paid. Just give them some bullshit teenager excuse when they ask after you show up at work the next day like nothing happened.”

Peter blinked. That could actually work, he was only sixteen. No self-respecting adult expects him to be responsible. “I can do that.” He thought for a moment before adding, “You know Mr. Stark, he mentions you a lot – well Stark Industries – but it seems more personal than that.”

“Tiberius Stone,” nodded Tony, the pieces finally falling together. He’d suspected when the others had told him her name, but he’d hoped he was wrong.

“Yeah,” said Peter with a nod. “How’d you know? You know him?”

“It fits,” replied Tony as he moved over to the halo screen. Peter followed behind him and looked at the screen. There was a pretty Asian female on the screen in a doctor’s coat. “And it’s probably more accurate to say I knew him.”

Peter nodded absently as he stared at the screen. “I’ve seen her before. She’s been to Viastone a few times, always with Mr. Stone. Who is she?”

Tony frowned as he stared at the picture in front of him. Time had been kind to her, he thought as he read over the info beside her picture. He was surprised she was a doctor now; she’d never shown much interest in learning anything when he’d known her. All Rumiko had wanted was to shop and have fun – and anything to piss off her dad.

“Someone I thought I’d never see again,” he finally replied, pressing a hand to his chest. Rumiko Fujikawa had been the first person he’d come close to truly loving after his parents deaths. She’d also been the first person to nearly destroy him when she’d broke things off and then started dating his biggest rival at the time.

It was going to be interesting seeing both of them again. He wondered how much of a coincidence it was that they were resurfacing now.

Tony flicked his hand through the air and stared at the picture of the couple before him. Mr. and Mrs. Tiberius Stone. It said Rumiko had actually hyphenated her name, but was still referred to as Dr. Rumiko Fujikawa; which made a lot more sense if her father was still the same asshole he remembered.

They’d married nearly ten years ago.

He was being held captive in a cave at the time, so maybe he’d missed his invitation to the wedding.

Peter eyes flicked back and forth between the picture of the couple – and wow, wasn’t that surprising? He’d never have guessed those two were married – and the look on Mr. Stark’s face. He wasn’t quite sure what that look meant, but he didn’t like it. Mr. Stark looked almost… sad. It worried him.

“Well, maybe you all could have a reunion, right?” tried Peter, attempting to cheer him up.

Tony smirked then. “I’m sure something like that will happen.” He turned to look at Peter thoughtfully. “Thanks for telling me this. So what else brings you by?”

“Anthony?” Kisa called out then from where she still sat in front of the halo computer. “Forgive my interruption, but I thought I should tell you this now. I heard you have also discovered that the one behind the camera is a man called Tiberius Stone. He is the CEO of Viastone and has recently
been awarded a contract with the US Army to provide not only equipment but also computer support including tech security. The interesting thing is Mr. Stone was apparently not their first choice, but the CEO promised to provide them with something that no other competitor in his industry could. Whatever this mystery is he apparently is supposed to be unveiling it for his client in a little over a week from now.”

Tony stood and quickly walked over to read the screen over her head, Peter quietly bringing up the rear.

“Hmm. It seems they had planned to approach Stark Industries, first…” read Tony aloud as he quickly skimmed the info she and FRIDAY had found. “What are the odds that his mystery has something to do with our special patient in the back?”

“I was wondering that very same thing,” she nodded. “But, what could he have honestly discovered that would be worth sharing in a week’s time?”

“That’s a very good question, Kisa,” agreed Tony with a frown.

“I don’t know,” said Peter thoughtfully. “Viastone has three floors dedicated to medical research only. I figured that’s why they were providing security for Walter Reed. It’s one of the largest medical facilities on the east coast. Maybe their mystery has something to do with that? Only employees with the highest clearance could get onto those floors.”

Both Kisa and Tony turned to look at him then, identical looks of astonishment on their faces.

After the silence carried on a little too long, Peter began to fidget. “What?” he said, eyes flicking from one to the other – and whoa, did she have some pretty eyes, or what?

“Nothing. Just sometimes I forget how smart you are,” replied Tony with a sigh. Suddenly he noticed the kid wasn’t listening to him as he was too busy staring at his assistant. Tony bit his bottom lip to hide his grin. “Kisa, Peter. Peter meet Kisa,” he couldn’t stop the grin though when Peter’s mouth fell open, but no words came out. “Close your mouth, kid.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” smiled Kisa as she looked at the young man before her. “You may call me Kisa.”

Peter closed his mouth on reflex, but couldn’t stop staring. She was even prettier than Liz from his Literature and Chem classes when she smiled like that, he thought, and he didn’t think anyone was prettier than Liz… When she tilted her head curiously at him he realized he’d been quiet for too long.

“H-Hi, I’m Peter,” he stammered then grinned.

Tony smiled, but didn’t laugh. He remembered those days, when he stuttered when trying to speak to a pretty girl and the last thing you wanted was someone laughing at your attempts. He noted that Kisa didn’t laugh at Peter either, just smiled and told him her name again.

“Calm down, Romeo, you can talk with Kisa later. Me first,” Tony told him with a pat on his shoulder before he turned back to Kisa. “What about our clairvoyant nurse, anything on her?”

“Yes, but not a great deal,” replied Kisa. “She is approximately twenty-six years old and has been working at the hospital for the last three years, but only as a nurse for one. She has a home address in Bethesda, Maryland where she appears to have been living for a little more than five years. And prior to six years ago she doesn’t seem to exist at all. FRIDAY nor I could find neither a birth certificate nor any trace of a medical record dated before 2011.”
“Fry?”

“She is correct, boss,” spoke up FRIDAY. “According to my databases Gwendolyn Poole with an ‘e’ did not exist prior to the year 2011. We have exhausted all avenues. For all intents and purposes, no one by the name was ever born.”

“Hmm. Thoughts?”

“Thinking is not a component of my programming, boss.”

“Who are you putting on a show for? I wrote your programming. See? For that I’m making you a redhead,” he crossed his arms and frowned.

“You already decided to do that,” she replied and was that an audible shrug he heard? “Perhaps her name is an alias?”

“Possible. Doesn’t explain how she knew Vision though. Bruce and I, sure, I can understand that, but Vision is not widely known and he was in disguise. Also, how did she know of Odin or to make sure they told me about Dr. Fujikawa?” he asked as he thought and the more he thought the more questions he came up with.

“I do not know where she has come by her knowledge and I also do not believe we will find those answers this way,” replied FRIDAY.

Tony sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose as he tried to think for a moment then shook his head. “Well she works for a government facility maybe the Army or the DoD have a bit more on her.”

“We checked them,” nodded Kisa. “They have nothing more to provide us unless what other information they have on her is not in any database.”

“You hacked the government?” asked Tony, a bit surprised. Sure, it was something he’d have done himself with FRIDAY, but he didn’t think Kisa would have. Then again, she also didn’t have the same fear or reservations that any normal human being would.

“She couldn’t have? I must say it was easier than I would have expected,” she asked with wide eyes then shrugged since the deed was already done anyway.

Tony returned her shrug with one of his own. There was nothing more they could do for now. Until Strange returned from wherever he went off to or something else came up, whichever came first, they were waiting.

“Well since you’re here, Romeo, why don’t you follow me while you tell me the other reason you’re here,” said Tony to Peter as he headed for the door. He needed to go help Vision and Bruce with the B.A.R.F program. “Kisa, you coming?”

Kisa nodded in reply when he looked over his shoulder to her. She gracefully stood as the computer screen in front of her shut down and disappeared from the air. “Thank you for your welcome assistance, FRIDAY.”

“Certainly, Ms. Kisa. If you require any assistance in future, please feel free to ask.”

“Lock it down, FRIDAY,” called out Tony as they all left the shop and headed for the elevator to go one floor up.
Natasha hung up the phone then turned to look at the man sitting on the couch in her living room.

“Maria says of the four men they took into custody only three are alive. Apparently, one of the newer agents was watching the fourth and neglected to check the prisoner’s mouth. He used a cyanide capsule, but not before saying something in an unknown language. They’ve sent an audio recording of his words to the Linguistics department, but so far nothing.”

Bruce nodded as he got an idea. “You think I can get a copy of that recording.”

“I’ll send it to you.”

“They get anything from the three still alive?”

“Nothing we don’t already know,” she shook her head. “Tony was their target, but they were also willing to capture him if they could. They were under orders, but S.H.I.E.L.D hasn’t found out who those orders came from yet. Maria’s going to let me know if she needs me to come in. I think she’s waiting for Fury to try.”

“Is he better than you at interrogation?” asked Bruce, curiously.

Natasha gave a slight shrug, she didn’t know if Fury was better or not. She was certain he’d have been able to break her, though, if she hadn’t allowed Clint to bring her in and wasn’t already prepared to tell them whatever they wanted to know. “He’s very good.”

Bruce nodded at that. “Seems like we’re waiting then.”

“Yeah,” said Natasha as she sat down on the couch beside him then she suddenly froze and blinked before pulling her phone back out of her back pocket to check the screen. She’d received a text message from Tony.

“Tony says T’challa will be here with Barnes in the morning. Also he and Kisa didn’t find any information on your mystery nurse. There’s no information on her anywhere prior to six years ago.”

“And the doctor?”

“He didn’t say,” she replied as she put her phone down on the coffee table in front of them. “But I have a feeling the doctor may be someone Tony knows personally.”

He had the feeling, too, just from what he’d heard the Colonel and Tony say earlier. Bruce was still concerned. There was something going on here, multiple something if he wasn’t mistaken and he didn’t like it.

“May I ask you something?” he asked her suddenly, turning his body towards her.

Natasha froze for a moment before nodding. She didn’t like being on her guard with him, but Bruce had stopped asking for her permission to ask her questions a long time ago, so why was he doing it now? Obviously he thought she wasn’t going to like whatever he was going to ask.

“I’ve gathered that you had a hand in helping Steve and his friend escape when you all fought at
Leipzig. You went underground shortly after that, it didn’t take a genius to realize you did that because you knew you weren’t safe when the whole time before that you were on the side of Tony and the Accords,” he began and waited for her nod to continue. “I was just wondering why, after helping them, you didn’t go with Steve and the others. I’m sure you could have found out where they were if you wanted.”

Natasha tilted her head at him. She’d been expecting a worse question than that; that was easy. “It’s simple, really. They didn’t need me. Steve and the others were safe in Wakanda. I knew Clint would want someone to check on his family and if I was with him he’d have tried to do it himself if he couldn’t get a hold of Fury to ask him to do it.”

“So you stayed behind to help out Clint?”

“No, I went to the farm to check on Laura and the kids,” she replied with a shake of her head. For a moment she was just going to leave it at that, but Bruce was still watching her, waiting for a full answer and unless she told him to stop he was going to keep asking. “I stayed to help Tony.”

Bruce looked at her curiously. It was what he’d suspected, but he was still a bit surprised. From what he remembered Tony had never been a favorite of hers, though he’d known Natasha had liked the billionaire more than she’d let on.

“Why?”

Natasha blinked. Why’d she stay to help Tony? That was a bit more difficult to answer. There were many reasons why. From the moment the Accords had been presented to them she and Tony had seen eye to eye. They’d both known and understood that the public needed to be protected by them and from them, because they wouldn’t always be able to do both. Too many times had an innocent died because they couldn’t save them.

Steve, as a soldier, couldn’t really understand that, he’d been to war and was hardened by it. He’d long since accepted and understood that you couldn’t save everyone and that often, when war took you to places where civilians lived, innocents died. It wasn’t right, but it was what happened. So when a missile hit a building that still had a few people inside, Steve’s solution was for him to be the one in charge of the missile next time.

Tony would never be able to accept that; not when those innocents died from something he did. Not when he knew there was another way. And in Natasha’s line of work, what she’d done and been trained to do prior to joining S.H.I.E.L.D, she understood exactly what Tony felt.

They were both tired of being the ones’ responsible for so many needless deaths.

And none of that had changed just because she’d helped Steve and Barnes get away from Ross. She still believed they needed oversite and to be held accountable; Steve believed that his own judgement was enough. To Natasha, that wasn’t just wrong, it was dangerous.

She’d seen what that kind of arrogance did to people.

History was full of men who believed they knew what was best for the rest of the world… and then they decided they, obviously, should be the ones’ to rule it, because the people were, obviously, too dumb to rule themselves. It was a cycle that repeated itself a lot and always ended the same way; with a dead dictator, but not before many others died first.

Luckily, Steve was proving to be smarter than the others and was starting to see the flaws in his thinking. And hopefully, he’d get his head out of his ass before he loses the one thing he doesn’t
realize he wants most.

Suddenly coming out of her thoughts she realized Bruce was still watching her and waiting for a reply. How was she to tell him all that? She wasn’t used to giving someone so much insight into who she was. People tended to hurt you when they knew they could and she had never been a trusting soul – or if she had it was at an age that was too young for her to currently remember.

“I stayed to help Tony because I agree with his views. Helping Steve didn’t change that,” she shook her head then and fully turned to Bruce. “You didn’t see him, Bruce. Losing the others really hit Tony. He felt abandoned and was spiraling. I couldn’t let him think I’d left him, too.”

“He needed you,” declared Bruce, saying what she wasn’t willing to put into words.

After a long, silent moment she nodded. “Yeah, he needed me.”

“I’m sure Tony didn’t make it easy for you.”

“He was angry with me,” she said with a nod. “I didn’t see what had happened to Rhodey, I’d already left the airport, but I know he’d blamed me with the others for it happening. I think he blamed himself more though. He was surprised to see me when I showed up with Laura and the kids. I think he’d expected me to join Steve, too.”

“Well, you two did seem to be pretty close. You definitely liked Steve more than Tony,” he said with a look. She couldn’t honestly be surprised that Tony had felt that way, could she?

She eyed him curiously then. Was that jealousy she heard in his voice? “You know there has never been anything between him and I, right? We’ve flirted, sure, but we are not compatible at all. I’d probably kill Steve if we were anything more than friends.”

Steve couldn’t handle her demons, thought Natasha with a frown. She’d entertained the thought when they’d first met. Of course, she had, who wouldn’t when seeing and meeting Steve for the first time? He was classically handsome, genuinely good hearted and had the body of a Greek God; everything to like.

On second thought, if he could handle Tony’s demons he could handle her’s – the difference was neither of them wanted him to. The first time Steve had shown any real emotion or interest in the world around him was when he met Tony Stark. Sure, it wasn’t the nicest emotion, but it was better than anything anyone else had been able to get out of the super solider and Tony hadn’t even been trying.

Sometimes, she couldn’t believe how blind she’d been when she’d kept trying to get Steve to ask Sharon out. Natasha was usually better than that. She knew not to judge a book by its cover and, like her, Steve was a superior example of that; he may look like the wholesome, all-American boy with his blue eyes and blond hair, but the man was a little shit if ever she met one.

He and Tony would be perfect together.

Natasha looked over at Bruce, who seemed to be deep in thought, as she quietly studied him. He was much more comfortable in his own skin than he was the last time she’d seen him. Wherever he’d been it had obviously made him more comfortable with himself and the Hulk. He didn’t feel like he had one foot out the door anymore.

Now, she knew, if he left again it would be because he chose to not because he needed to.

Bruce looked up suddenly then, brown meeting green. For a moment they just stared at one
another, both just happy to have the other there. Silently he reached up a hand and cupped her cheek gently, smiling when she responded by leaning, just a bit, into his touch.

“You’re used to being needed,” he said to her quietly. “I needed you before, now I don’t.”

Natasha froze then, thinking she should pull away, but the look in his eyes confused her and before she could make up her mind he was talking again.

“I want you though,” continued Bruce, not removing his hand. He saw her still and he thought he had an idea of what she thought he was going to say. “I don’t need you to stay grounded, but I still want you with me. Is that okay? Can you be with me knowing that I want you beside me not that I need you to be? I didn’t like my life when you weren’t with me.”

Natasha swallowed as she stared back at him, her eyes flicking between both of his. She’d never been someone’s choice before simply for her; there was always some kind of usefulness to her, a something that she provided that no one else could. She didn’t know how to just be Natasha, the girlfriend they just really wanted to have with them.

But she was willing to try.

Slowly she nodded then leaned in closer. Bruce grinned as he leaned in as well, closing the last bit of space between them, gently pressing his lips to hers. His grin grew into a full fledge smile again her lips before he tilted his head to get a better angle to deepen the kiss. He ran his tongue lightly along the seam between her lips, requesting entrance, then gently dived in when she opened on a sigh.

Bruce allowed himself just a small, quick dance with her tongue before slowly pulling back. He gave one final lick to the plump, fleshy part of her lower lip before pulling back enough to look her in the eyes, which were only at half mass.

“I have to go,” he whispered, not wanting to break the mood. “I promised Tony I’d help him and Vision with the changes to B.A.R.F,” he frowned slightly then,” he really does need to change that name.”

“He does,” she agreed quietly. “Will you come back here after?”

“Is that an invite? I wouldn’t dream of presuming…” he grinned.

“Come back here when you’re finished, Banner,” she said, giving him a look.

“Alright,” he smiled.

“Don’t forget to bring a change of clothes,” she added as he finally pulled away from her completely. “We don’t want a repeat of this morning.”

“You’re never going to let me forget that are you?”

“Nope,” she smiled as he shook his head and turned to leave.

“I’ll see you later,” he said with one last look over his should before he left the apartment.

~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~

Royal Palace of Wakanda, Africa
T’challa finished reading the document on the desk in front of him then quickly signed the bottom – his country was now one step closer to controlling the discovery of mutants in Wakanda and how to educate them; a battle he been long fighting – before he looked up at the man standing in front of him, patiently waiting for his attention.

“Thank you for your patience, my friend, I did not want to have to reread that from the beginning and that would have been my fate if I were to stop upon your arrival. Forgive me for keeping you,” he said to his friend and head scientist. “You have my undivided attention now, Shetani. Please, tell me how our guest fairs.”

“I understand, your highness, please think nothing of it,” bowed Shetani once more before answering his king’s question. “Unfortunately, I cannot accurately gauge how Mr. Barnes fairs emotionally; he keeps his own counsel and tends not to answer any direct questions regarding his wellbeing. From a medical stand, he is in perfect health, other than his missing limb, which does not seem to hinder his movements in any way. As for his HYDRA programming, the nanite neuro blockers we placed to block them seem to be working smoothly. I do not anticipate any issues.”

T’challa nodded as he took all that in. “Good. Have you informed him what is going on?”

“I have not told him everything,” he replied with a small frown. “I have let him know exactly what we have done in regards to his programming – did you know he is surprisingly knowledgeable in engineering, asking some very insightful questions?” At the arched brow the king shot at him, he figured that was probably a ‘no’. “I thought it best to leave the explaining of everything else to you.” Of course, the king can survive being hit by a super soldier, unlike himself.

“I see,” nodded the king as he thought for a moment. “And you think he can handle what is coming? Where we are going?”

“I do not know, but I believe he is stronger than we give him credit for,” replied Shetani with all seriousness. “I think he is quite aware something is going on. He has asked for both Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson multiple times. I did not have the heart to tell him they are no longer here, but I will not be surprised if he doesn’t just get up and go look for them on his own soon.”

“Right,” nodded T’challa as he stood. “I guess that means I need to make haste with those answers then. This is best. It will give him a few hours to begin accepting what is happening and he will have the entire flight to prepare.”

Shetani waited for the king to come out from behind the desk and head for the door before falling into step three paces behind him. “I do not know how Tony Stark does this. If it were me in his place, I do not think I would be able to help the man who murdered my parents despite it not being that man’s fault. His strength is remarkable.”

“Yes,” agreed T’challa as he headed for the guest quarters of his home. “Anthony Stark has proven time and again to be a very formidable warrior with a compassionate heart. I would not want him for an enemy. From what I have witnessed of the man I believe that given the right motivation there is nothing he could not accomplish. We are fortunate to call him friend.”

“I would very much like to meet him one day,” declared Shetani with a nod. “He sounds like an interesting individual and I am very curious to know how he discovered our Vibranium on his own. Do you think he would share his knowledge with me? Scientist to scientist?”

T’challa laughed heartily at this before shooting a grin at his friend over his shoulder. “I do not
know my friend, but I will endeavor to get him to visit and perhaps you may get a chance to try your hand with him. Perhaps if you are also willing to share knowledge he will do the same, no?”

“I must ponder this more,” said Shetani, uncertain. “We have many secrets that must remain so.”

“Well, maybe the Panther God will deem Anthony worthy and your concern will be unnecessary,” suggested T’challa as they turned down the hall to the guest chambers. They were almost to their destination.

“Do you think so, your highness?” he asked curiously. “None of the others seemed to be thought worthy while visiting with us.”

“Yes, well,” began T’challa, who frowned at that. It was true; their Panther God did not seem to hold any interest in Steve Rogers and his group, though Bast did seem to keep a rather close eye on the young witch while she was here. “I do not believe the Panther God agreed with their stance on the Accords or how they went about the events that transpired. Betrayal is a high transgression and what they did could be seen as such.”

“Hmm,” nodded Shetani. He was neither agreeing nor disagreeing. He couldn’t, really, for all his knowledge on said events was all hearsay. He had not been there to see any of it, but from what he’d heard his king’s assessment was not unfounded. “Well, your highness, I think I will leave you to this. I’m sure my sister will remain ever attentive to your physical wellbeing.”

T’challa fought down his automatic reaction to roll his eyes at his friend as he watched him walk away further down the hall while he stopped at a closed door. He looked to the guard who’d been discretely following them then and gave a slight grin.

“Your brother will never change, Asana,” he said, looking into her pretty green eyes.

“No, your majesty, I do not imagine he will,” she replied, fighting the urge to look down the hall to her brother. She missed talking to her big brother, but at least she still was able to see him.

“Hm,” he turned to the door, but paused before entering. “Remain outside the room. I think he will not appreciate an audience for this, even if it is just an audience of one.”

“Are you certain, your highness?” Asana asked, a bit uncomfortable with the order – for that’s exactly what it was no matter how it was worded.

“I can handle it if anything comes up,” he replied with a nod. At her bow he nodded in gratitude. “Thank you.”

Asana moved to the stand on the left side of the door as the king knocked once and then entered, closing the door firmly behind him. She was still uncomfortable with the king being behind closed doors with a potential hostile, but she could not do anything against a direct order unless her worries proved to be necessary and their guest attacked the king. It grated that she couldn’t act unless he did first, but at least she had the comfort in knowing the king was able to take care of himself if need be.

With that thought, Asana settled in to guard the door while keeping half an ear for any noises or loud voices coming from inside the room.

* They’d woken him up.
James Barnes sat with his legs bent on the window seat connected to the large window in his borrowed room, which was more like an apartment than any room he’d seen. He’d been out of cryo for nearly twenty-four hours now and despite everything the doctors were telling him no one was telling him what was going on.

He’d been told that the crap HYDRA had stuffed in his head couldn’t be removed without damaging his brain, but they had found a way to block the neuro transmitters without having to remove them. No one would ever be able to control him as the Winter Soldier again and while that was really great to hear, it didn’t change the fact that the Winter Soldier was him. He would always know and remember the people he’d hurt and the lives he’d taken.

He’d once told Tony Stark that he remembered all of them and he hadn’t been lying. He remembered every face, every name and every last look of the eyes of every man and woman he’d been ordered to kill. He didn’t even have to close his eyes to see them. They were always there. He carried them with him everywhere he went and he'd continue to carry them until the day he died. It was his penance.

No matter what they did to him that would never change.

But no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t even remember the color of his mother’s eyes.

Bucky knew they were all just trying to help and he appreciated every effort, but all he really wanted right now was to talk Steve and irritate Wilson. Those two things were the only things that made him feel even half like himself… but Steve nor Wilson had yet to come see him and he was beginning to get the feeling that these people were keeping something from him.

He sighed to himself as he looked out the window at the lush green forest in front of him. He gently rested his forehead against the thick glass, welcoming the cold touch to his heated skin as he stared at his reflection. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and he froze when not a moment later the door opened

Bucky was not surprised to see the reflection of the king entering the room and closing the door behind him. There were not many people who were light enough on their feet that Bucky couldn’t hear them approaching, the king happened to be one of them. Slowly he turned to face the king, not wanting to be rude when the man had risked his country’s security to help him.

Was he supposed to stand and bow?

“Hello, James,” smiled T’challa in greeting as he took in the other man’s appearance. Barnes looked much better than the last time he’d seen the super soldier. One of his servants had obviously helped him brush out his hair and shave.

With those cheekbones, it was very obvious to see that James Barnes was a very handsome man.

Bucky nodded in greeting as he waited for the king to speak. He had a feeling he was finally about to get the answers they’d been denying him since waking him up.

“Can we talk for a moment?” asked T’challa though he was only being polite as it was not really a request. “I would like to discuss some things with you and I’m sure you have questions for me as well.”

“Where’s Steve?” asked Bucky. That was the first thing he wanted to know. Anything else could wait a moment more.

T’challa nodded as he moved to grab the chair at a nearby desk and carried it over to sit directly in
front of Barnes. He wasn’t surprised that Steve was the first thing the other man asked about. “To put it simply, Steve is no longer here. He and the others have returned to New York having been pardoned by your government.”

Bucky nodded slowly at that. “Wilson too?”

“Yes,” replied T’challa with a nod. “You should know that a pardon has been granted to you as well. You will be subjected to the same restrictions as the others that I can go into detail for you later, but this does mean you are also welcome to return to the United States should you wish it.”

His eyes widened at that. He’d been pardoned? How? Why would anyone pardon him knowing all the lives he’d taken? He should be thrown in the deepest cell and the key thrown away. There was no way he could ever make amends for all he’d done.

“What else?”

T’challa tilted his head curiously at him, just like the big cat he was named for would. “What makes you assume there is more?”

“You didn’t need to pay me a personal visit just to tell me I can go home,” Bucky replied with a shrug. He was an expert on reading body language and while the king was very adept at concealing or suppressing any telling movements that would betray his thoughts he wasn’t good enough to hide from Bucky.

T’challa conceded to that truthful observation, silently studying him for a moment before he decided just to tell him. “I know the doctors and Shetani have all told you what has been done to block the devices HYDRA put in your head, but this has only addressed half of your problem.”

Bucky frowned at that, but nodded, knowing it to be true. If you asked him he had more than half the problem left.

“You still have the behavioral conditioning of the Winter Soldier and the doctors believe that the only way to truly counter this is to find a way to get in touch with James Barnes, the man.”

“And how do they expect me to do that?” he asked, raising a skeptical brow. “I barely remember my life prior to being the Winter Soldier. There are a few memories that have begun to surface since I started to remember Steve, but I couldn’t begin to tell you which is really a memory and which is just a dream.”

“We are aware of this,” he nodded, “which is why we have decided to help you with that. You must understand, though, this is not a solution. It will not erase the Winter Soldier from you… but perhaps it will give you the ability to accept that fact and, perhaps, one day make it your own. You can never go back, James Barnes, but neither do you have to put your life on hold. There is a way forward for you if you allow it.”

Bucky just stared at him as he let all that wash over him. He wasn’t sure if any of that was true, but he was willing to hear the king out.

“Alright, I’ll bite,” he nodded, “How are you going to help me remember my past?”

“I’m glad you asked,” smiled T’challa. “We are going to use a very special device. I do not know the specifics of how it works, but I do believe it is the best option for you to do this.”

“Hm,” grunted Bucky as he rubbed his sweating palm over his jean clad knee. “And where exactly is this miracle machine?”
“New York,” replied T’challa, eyes locking onto his. “Our plane will be leaving to head there in a few hours. Tony Stark and the rest will be expecting us early tomorrow.”

Bucky froze. He’d loved to believe he hadn’t heard right, but he knew he had. “You’re taking me to Tony Stark?”

T’challa nodded, keeping silent.

“You do know he’s the one who destroyed my arm and tried to kill me?”

T’challa nodded again.

“And now you’re taking me to him because he’s the one who has this machine you mentioned?”

“He created it and, therefore, he is the best one to help you.”

Bucky blinked at that. He hadn’t been expecting that. Really. Tony Stark had created a machine to help him? The man who killed his parents? Bucky shook his head; he just couldn’t believe that. There was something not right here.

“And Steve, Wilson and the others will be there?”

“Yes,” replied T’challa. “They are already there, as I already mentioned.”

Bucky nodded, eyes boring into his. “Why?”

“Why?” repeated the king, genuinely confused. “Why what?”

“Stark. Why is he willing to help me?” clarified Bucky, his one remaining hand balled in a fist in his lap. “I killed his parents. He doesn’t owe me anything, so why is he helping me?”

“Ah. I see,” said T’challa with a nod to no one in particular. He gave the soldier before him an assessing look, knowing the answers he was looking for he couldn’t get from T’challa.

“What does that mean? See what?”

“Just an observation,” said T’challa with a dismissing wave of his hand as he stood and moved the chair back to where it belonged. “You will need to ask Tony that question if you truly wish to know the answer.”

“Why can’t you tell me?” asked Bucky as he also stood.

“Because I can only speculate as to the answer as I am not Tony,” he replied as he turned to face the other man. “What you are looking for can only come from him.”

“And what is that?” he asked, pressing his fist to his thigh to hide the shaking in his hand.

“Absolution,” replied T’challa, meeting his gaze with an understanding look of his own. He knew what it felt like to need to be forgiven. T’challa gave him one last look before he turned for the door to leave, deciding to give the other man some time alone with his thoughts.

“I will send someone for you when we are ready to depart. Until then get some rest,” he said as he opened the door. The man was going to need all the rest he could get now. “One way or another, things are going to change for you.”

Bucky met the other man’s eyes for a moment, a slight sense of panic and fear coming over him
before he swallowed it down and nodded. He looked away, out the window as he heard and
watched the reflection of the door close behind him.

Why did he have a sinking feeling that all of this was going to go horribly wrong?
Chapter IX

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the long delay, everyone. Apparently, I misjudged just how bad my house was. It took a LOT of time, work and MONEY (FML) to fix. I didn't have the time to be online or post. Everything is much better now though. Now, I just have to put my house back together. Yay me. :/ I'm working to get the next four chapters I have written out as fast as I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter: IX

Somewhere on the Eastern Coast of the United States

"Agent Hill," he gave her a slight nod in greeting. "What do you have for me?"

"Unfortunately, sir, not much," replied Agent Hill as she looked at her boss from the vid screen. She wasn't quite sure where he was nor how secure the line was from his end, so she knew she'd have to wait for when he returned to tell him everything. Not that she had much to tell anyway.

"It looks like your suspicions were right about a certain guest's return, but to my knowledge he has yet to speak of it. I've been told he is waiting to speak to everyone at once. Leads me to believe that whatever it is the problem, though important, is not immediate."

"I see," replied Fury, keeping his thoughts on the subject to himself for now. "And the children? Are they playing nice with each other?"

"I think they're all putting in some effort, some more than others," she nodded as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Tensions are high and trust is shakey at best, but this latest attack and something else involving our guest has been keeping some of them occupied."

"Do you know what this other issue is?"

"No, but I also haven't tried finding out," she replied. Maria had enough to focus on with the men who'd attacked Stark and she knew her boss would want to know more on that front instead of whatever was going on with Thor and the others. She figured if it was something that needed her attention either Natasha or Stark would have said something.

Fury nodded as he thought for a moment. Many things were happening at once and while they all seemed like separate events he couldn't help thinking that there was something he was missing. First, the missing pieces of the team he'd created had returned after hiding out in Wakanda, of all places, for months; Thor and Banner also returned and he had a feeling Banner was much farther away than anyone realized; then Stark is attacked on his doorstep practically right after said returns; a new player with unknown power seems to have attached herself to Stark; Stone, a rival from Stark's past suddenly decided to return to the United States a few months prior and now their resident alien god may be here to do more than impart dangerous information.
Why did it seem like Stark was at the center of all of it?

If he were to reevaluate and say everything started when Stone arrived and not when the others returned from Wakanda... He'll have to keep his eye open awhile longer it seemed.

Perhaps it was time for someone else to show himself as well. He'd have to put the thought to him after he finished talking with Maria, he decided as he focused his attention back on his agent.

"Have you learned anything more from our unwanted guests?"

"No, but Agent Simmons is positive the image from their robes is neither a W nor an arrow. She says it's more like the head of a Triton, but she doesn't believe that's what it is either. She also believes that whatever it is it represents something or someone they follow or worship."

"So, another God," he sighed. He was sorely getting tired of gods.

"Or something they believe is a god," agreed Maria. She was completely unsurprised. Working with S.H.I.E.L.D for so long her surprise factor was completely broken. "Question is, what does it all have to do with Stark?" I'm still working on that one."

"Bring in Romanov, if you feel it's necessary. I should be back before noon tomorrow and in the meantime, get me everything you can on Tiberius Stone," he paused for a moment to think then added, "and his wife."

"Sir?"

"Humor me, Agent. I find his timing to be a little suspect."

"You never did like him, sir."

"And that hasn't changed," he replied, not bothering to deny it. Stone was a spineless shithead who would sell his soul to the highest bidder. Like Justin Hammer, he also believed himself smart enough to sit in a league with Tony Stark and just like Hammer he was also wrong. The fact he made himself an issue for Fury all those years ago didn't help raise Fury's opinion of him. "I'm interested to know why he's really here."

"He hasn't contacted him at all, you know. I doubt Stark is even aware he's in the country."

"Then you don't know Stark as well as you think you do if you believe that," he said as he leaned back in his seat. "And the fact he hasn't contacted him leaves me more concerned than if he had; especially knowing whom he is married to. Get me that information, Agent."

"Right away, sir."

"I'll see you in less than 12 hours, Agent Hill. Contact me if something comes up before then and good work," he nodded and moved to cut the feed when he paused as another thought came to him. "And agent, when I return I'd like to know how the hell Stark's A.I was able to find me while I was dark when no one else could."

"I'll leave that conversation for you, sir, if you don't mind," said Maria, trying to hide her smirk. Stark had told Fury once before that he couldn't hide from him.

Fury just sighed and nodded at her as he muttered to himself about billionaire brats too smart for their own good and signed off.
"You've been complaining about that for years, Nicky," said the woman leaning in the doorway in front of him, a smile on her pretty face. "I'm surprised he hasn't figured you out yet."

"And he never will if I have any say in it," he frowned as he looked at his wife. "I learned a long time ago the best way to deal with a Stark is to never let them figure out there is anything to figure out."

"You're going to have to tell him sooner or later, love," she said as she watched him with an exasperated yet fond look on her face. Her husband could be so stubborn sometimes. Epic proportions of stubborn. She still couldn't believe how no one seemed to realize that about him. Other than herself there were only two people in the world who truly knew her husband - and one died a long time ago.

And her husband has never forgiven himself for not being able to stop it from happening.

"She would want him to know," she said as she walked over to him and leaned down to place a gentle kiss on his temple. "And she would want you to be the one to tell him." She tried not to roll her eyes at his frown as she rubbed a hand over his head. "I don't imagine that boy feels like he has many people in his life who wants to be there. Besides, he deserves to know."

"He's far from being a boy, Renee."

"He will always be my baby boy, Nicky," she replied with a shrug. "Just think about it. I put your plate in the warmer if you're still hungry later."

"I just have one more call to make," he promised as he wrapped an arm around her slim waist. He wanted to spend the last hours he had with her uninterrupted, so he was going to make the next call short.

"Take your time," she nodded as she pulled away from him and headed for the door. "I'll be in the bedroom." At the door she stopped to give him one last look over her shoulder. "Tell Phil hello for me."

Fury's one eye widened as he watched his wife leave his office. She was not supposed to know that, he thought with a shake of his head. This was what he got for falling in love with and marrying a C.I.A agent. And he always went after the best.

He shook his head again as he dialed and waited for the screen to engage. Moments later a familiar face appeared on the screen and he grinned. There weren't many people he would break protocol for, but the man on the screen was definitely one of them.

"Director," spoke the man on the screen with that knowing look on his face that Fury had long since become use to. "What can I do for you?"

"We need to talk, Agent," he said as he folded his hands in front of him. "I hope you haven't changed your mind about what you told me you were ready to do a few days ago."

"I haven't," he assured, already knowing where this was going. He'd been keeping an eye on activities, too and was well aware there was something going on. He just hadn't figured out what it all meant yet.

"Good," replied Fury as he looked at his oldest friend, "because we have work to do."
Once again it was 3:00 am and he couldn't sleep. It seemed old, bad habits were coming back, because he was once again having trouble sleeping through the night. Instead of going to his music room though, he'd come down to the communal kitchen to get a bowl of Coffee Coffee ice cream. The struggle was real and Ben & Jerry knew just how to handle it.

James Buchanan Barnes was going to be in his home in less than ten hours.

He felt like he was being forced into a corner and anyone who knew him knew Tony Stark hated to be forced into a corner. He didn't do well with corners. He also didn't break his word and he'd agreed to help Barnes; equaled corner.

He'd agreed to help the man who'd killed his mother.

Tony took another bite of coffee heaven as he let that thought sink in and marinate. He'd told Steve that he didn't blame Barnes for his parents' deaths and for the most part that was true, but there was a part of him, a small part, that could still see the image of his mom's death at Barnes' hands and that part of him couldn't help blaming the man. The boy inside who would forever miss his mother blamed him.

That part of him will probably always blame Barnes no matter how unreasonable but, luckily for everyone, that part of him spent most of his time in a corner balling his eyes out.

His mom had been beautiful, strong, elegant and - most importantly - she'd loved Tony. When Howard wasn't around he'd never had to wear a mask for her. She'd tried so hard to be the mediator between him and Howard and neither one of them had made it easy on her. How often had she tried to convince him that Howard loved him? That in his own way he really did love and want Tony and just didn't know how to show him that? Tony had stopped believing that lie by the time he was eleven. But she'd never stopped trying right up until the end.

Life would have been so much easier for her if she'd just packed her bags and washed her hands of the both of them.

She'd also probably be alive today.

Usually he'd go to his music room when he was feeling this way so he could immerse himself in the memories, but he couldn't do that now, because it wasn't his memories that were keeping him awake. The past was only partially his problem. There was so much going on, so much he had to do, to figure out and on top of all of that there was Steve.

He was in love with Steve.

His fingers tapped out a rhythm absently on the table as he let his mind continue down it's dangerous path. Tony was in love with Steve... and he couldn't do a thing about it, because Steve didn't love him. Steve cared about him, he knew, and felt guilty for hurting him, but he didn't love Tony. He didn't know who held Steve's heart if anyone did; if it was Sharon or Barnes... maybe still Aunt Peggy, but he was certain either one of them was a much better candidate than him. Steve was too good for Tony, whom only ever hurt the people close to him.

Howard always said he always reached for things out of his grasp.

None of it mattered though. Not his feelings and not Steve's lack of them, because he couldn't even think of Steve touching him, much less anything else, without panicking. Just being alone in the same room with the other man made him nervous and jittery. And no matter how much he told
himself that he had nothing to fear from Steve, no matter how much he believed it in his heart, his mind felt differently. There was no way he could explain this to Steve and risk making the man feel even worse - which he didn't deserve - and Tony had no idea how to fix it, so it was easier on the both of them to just avoid him altogether.

Which was proving to be a lot easier than he initially thought it would be, which made him certain Steve was avoiding him, too.

The entire situation was a complete cluster-fuck and Tony had no idea how to even begin to make it right. How do you rewire your brain to un-know something?

He'd thought about creating something that could remove or hide the memory - he was positive he could do it - but that wouldn't solve his problem, only cover it up. When it came down to it, the bottom line was that he didn't trust Steve. Couldn't trust him.

And he wasn't certain that they had the time for them to start from scratch and rebuild it; not if the Avengers were going to be needed soon.

"Do you often break your sleep early to indulge in frozen sweet cream?"

Tony froze at the unexpected voice, breaking his chain of thought, before raising his gaze to meet Kisa's. He had not heard her or the elevator arrive and he wondered for a moment if she even had to use the elevator. Last he saw her she was going to bed in one of his guest rooms in the penthouse.

"Shouldn't you know the answer to that?" he replied, brow arched.

"I am not a voyeur, Anthony," replied Kisa with a frown. "I apologize if anything I have said or done has caused you to believe that."

Now it was his turn to frown. Tony hadn't meant to imply that. It was what he thought, but he'd never planned to say it. He was taking his frustrations out on her, because she was there and a part of it and, of them all, the easiest to deal with.

"I didn't mean that," he shook his head. Not quite apologizing, but not not apologizing either.

"Yes, you did," she contradicted him, but there was no ire in her voice. "May I sit?"

He shrugged and nodded to the seat across from him. The company was unexpected, but not unwelcome and maybe she could help take his mind off his other problems. He noticed her eyeing his bowl of ice cream and grinned as he pushed both the bowl and spoon across the table to her.

Kisa gave him a contemplative look as she accepted the bowl. She'd often been curious about the popular sweet in the past, but never had the occasion to try it. She figured her curiosity must have shown on her face since he was offering it to her.

"Go ahead," he nodded towards the frozen treat when she hesitated. "Don't use your teeth and its coffee flavored, just an F.Y.I." He watched her slide a small bite into her mouth using only her lips, following his instructions without question, before a small grin appeared on her face as she nodded at him and went for another bite. "So tell me, what exactly is a Divine Guard?"

Kisa paused in her enjoyment of the cold treat as she eyed him again. She'd been expecting him to ask her questions and she figured that was as good a place to start as any other. Taking one last bite - and deciding that she quite liked coffee flavored frozen sweet cream - Kisa pushed the bowl away from her, so as not to be tempted to continue indulging and looked up to meet her Ward's gaze.
"You understand that there are things that I cannot tell you, yes?" she asked and waited for his slight nod as he gave her his undivided attention before continuing. "Good. Then let's see, what is a Divine Guard? I guess the best answer is that we are a lot like what humans believe are Guardian Angels. We are actually responsible for such beliefs."

"So, you're an Angel?" he asked skeptically. "Where are your wings?"

"No, we are not angels," she replied with a shake of her head.

Tony noticed she didn't answer both questions, but figured that what she said could be an answer for both. "And you're not human?"

"No, I am not human," she confirmed. "It would be more accurate to say we are what humans understand as Fae or fairies than to call us angels, though that would also not be right. We are of the Nine Realms, but do not really reside, exclusively, on any of the worlds. We were created to protect and though we protect all, Midgard or Earth is our main focus."

"Who created you?"

"We were created by Mother."

"Mother?"

She shook her head then. "That is all I can say on that."

He nodded, filing that away for later. Maybe he could ask Thor if he knew who this Mother was... Right now, it wasn't important so he easily accepted it wasn't something she could talk about. "Earlier you told me you've been with me always. What does that mean?"

"Exactly that, Anthony. I have been with you since the day you were born." Kisa suddenly smiled then. "Your Mr. Jarvis was quite entertaining; He never stopped believing that Maria could change a diaper and was quite determined to catch her in the act."

Tony eyes widened at that as he blinked, momentarily speechless.

"How old are you? I wouldn't believe you were out of your twenties..."

"I am 325 years old," she said with a nod then smiled at his disbelieving look. "Remember, not human? Thor is much older than I am and you see what he looks like. We do not age as humans do, yet you, as a species, make far better use of your time than either of our kinds have, if you ask me. Humans are extraordinary creatures; is it any wonder that beings thought of as gods like to not only be around humans, but protect them as well?"

"Don't forget rule us," he said with a scoff and a roll of his eyes.

"Yes, well, there is that," she grimaced. "Some say it is a special kind of honor to win Loki's attention."

"Really?" he arched a brow, wondering what idiot could possibly think that after meeting the dark haired god. "I can honestly say I'm not feeling particularly honored and I'm going to go out on a limb and say that I doubt anyone in this tower or in this city would disagree with me."

"I did not say it was a good kind of honor," she sighed.

He nodded absently at that as he wondered whether or not to ask his next question. There were
many things he wanted to ask her, but this question was the one he wanted an answer to the most...
After another silent moment went by with her patiently watching him from the other side of the table, he mentally shrugged and decided to just ask.

The worse she could do was refuse to answer... He wasn't sure what he would say or do if she did that though. Tony really wanted to know the answer.

"Why me?" he asked, meeting her gaze straight on. There were many people throughout his life he'd wanted to ask that question to; his own parents being two of them - though the question he had for them was a slightly different one. *Why not me?* But, that was one question he would never be able to ask.

Kisa tilted her head as she regarded him silently. For a moment she thought about asking him to clarify, but she had a feeling she knew exactly what he was asking. It was a two-fold question, a double-edged sword... and she only truly had an answer for one.

"Why you were chosen to be a Ward or why do I protect you?"

"Either. Both. Aren't they the same?" Tony arched a brow, slightly confused. Wasn't she protecting him because he was a Ward?

That would probably be right under normal circumstances, but Kisa knew he wasn't going to be a conventional case from the moment she met Anthony. "I do not know why or how a Ward is chosen. It's not for me to know. I do know Wards are often people or beings who are meant for something and it's not hard to see that you, Anthony, have a very bright destiny."

Tony blinked. He'd been hoping for something more. Thor had said something similar in regards to Kisa once before, if he remembered right, but he had ignored it then. Tony didn't believe in fate or destiny or whatever it was called. He believed in choices. He didn't like thinking that he didn't have control of his own life.

Never again will someone else control what he did with his life.

"You would have to ask an Elder that question should the chance ever provide itself." Tony's attention immediately snapped back to Kisa when she started talking again. "As one of the Guard I am obligated to protect you as my Ward, but I also have the right to decline an assignment if I choose and have sufficient reason." She knew she would never do that though; she had grown far too attached to Anthony to trust another to keep him safe. She'd not make that mistake again. "I chose to stay."

"Go on; there's something you're not saying," he said after a moment passed without her saying anything else. Tony could tell from the look in her eyes that there was more. He was the king of not saying and could easily recognize the signs even though her face remained carefully neutral.

Kisa stiffened and looked away from him then as she turned her head towards the windows and the door that lead out to one of the launch decks. She didn't want to speak any more about that, but she'd made a promise to herself that she would not ever lie to him. He'd been lied to so much growing up and every time he knew it and it took something from him. Kisa refused to ever be the cause of that look.

She sighed and raised her chin before she turned back to him, gaze steady. She'd made her choice and she had to accept that. "Do you know you were barely three years old the first time you were kidnapped?"
Tony was confused at that non sequitur. He gave her a questioning look as he nodded; he knew he'd been kidnapped at such a young age, but he didn't remember it. He didn't understand what his kidnapping had to do with what they'd been talking about though.

"You were gone for less than 24 hours and you never even knew you'd been taken. That was also your first and last nanny. Jarvis took over the position with his other duties and refused to allow it to go to anyone else. Your parents had to hire someone to help him with his other duties around the mansion since another nanny was out of the question. Jarvis would not allow anyone he didn't know anywhere near you."

That he didn't know. He'd often wondered why Jarvis spent so much time with him. He'd thought his parents had made Jarvis do so much on top of watching him. He had no idea that it was Jarvis who'd chosen to do that.

"Unfortunately, his efforts did not stop you from being kidnapped again, but you were never taken from inside your home again. He loved you very much," she continued, watching him intently. "By the time you were six years old you'd been taken fifteen times."

"I know," he told her with a small shrug. "I read the biography."

"I did not," she said, face solemn. "I was there for every one. I made sure you were never harmed during these times and kept you entertained until you were retrieved."

"Why not just rescue me yourself?" he asked curiously, with a head tilt. He actually remembered some of those kidnappings and, beyond the initial grabbing, he didn't remember ever being truly afraid. He'd always known someone was going to come get him and bring him back to his mother. He even had a vague memory of himself at four or five years old telling a man that his Uncle Nicky was going to come get him and he was going to be very mad.

"It wasn't necessary," she told him, a knowing look in her eye. "I helped when needed, but someone else had your rescue sufficiently handled. And that way I was also able to remain hidden."

Tony arched a brow at her, but she didn't offer any more on the subject. He didn't know what to think about what she told him. On the one hand, he knew a little more about her, but on the other she hadn't really told him much. It was nice to hear that Jarvis really had loved him, but he stopped doubting that a long time ago. Nothing she'd said so far really proved that she'd been there though, if he were honest with himself, there was a part of him that already believed her.

Suddenly, almost startling him, Kisa reached out and tapped two fingers, lightly, on the back of the hand he was tapping on the table with.

"Try to remember when life was so tender that no one wept except the willow..." Kisa sang quietly and trailed off into a hum. She felt the slight tremble in his hand before he froze as she gently pulled her hand back. She had his attention now. "The first time Maria sang that to you, you were barely through your first season. You'd just turned four the first time she sat you beside her and played it on the piano. You hummed the last half with her. It was her favorite song and ever since you learned to play it on the piano yourself you tap out the keystrokes whenever you are nervous or preoccupied. Usually on whatever surface that's available, but only in recent years on the middle of your chest." She mimicked the action on her own chest in demonstration as she looked pointedly at his hand - which had conveniently stopped. "I don't even think you realize you're doing it most the time."

He swallowed and thought, idly, Kisa had a pleasant singing voice as he stared at his hand in
wonder. Tony knew he had a bad habit of tapping whenever he was required to sit still for more than a few minutes. His mother used to say that because his brain never shut off his body couldn't either and would often grab his hand when the tapping started if they were around guests. And Howard. Howard couldn't stand the tapping.

The only time Tony could truly contain all his energy was when he was working in his shop, focusing it on creating something and when he slept. Pepper used to often comment how it was weird and completely unnatural how still he was in his sleep. In the beginning of their relationship she would often check his pulse to make sure he was still breathing, it unsettled her so much. Unfortunately, she wasn't the first to tell him that, but unless he was having a nightmare Tony knew he slept like the dead. He'd always been that way.

But, he'd never noticed before that his energetic tapping had a rhythm. He wondered if his mom had noticed what he was tapping and if so, what she must have thought.

From across the table, Kisa quietly observed as he took in what she'd just told him and fell into his memories. She was aware of what that song meant to him, his mother's song, and she knew it was also not something most people knew about him. Kisa had figured it would be the best way to get him to see, but now she wasn't so sure it was a good idea to remind him of his mother.

Anthony was so stressed, being pulled in so many directions with everyone wanting or needing something from him. And there was still so much more he didn't know. Was it any wonder he was finding sleep difficult? If she could protect him from it all, she would, but no interference was a rule she could not break and she was certain Anthony would not want her to.

When the silence between them stretched on she figured she'd leave him alone to think and gently stood up. Walking around the table to his side, she placed a hand lightly on his shoulder. She waited for him to look at her before nodding. "I know you have more questions for me, Anthony, but I think you've had enough for tonight," she said as she gave his shoulder a squeeze before letting go completely.

"I don't believe in fate," he told her, looking her straight in her eyes.

"I know," she nodded. "You think fate takes away your control, but fate and destiny are not one and the same, Anthony. And your choices are still your own." She sighed then and turned away to leave as she added, "As they always have been."

The one thing she could never fully protect him from.

"Kisa."

She stopped at the door and looked back. "Yes, Anthony?"

Tony paused. There was something in her eyes that he couldn't quite identify... and wasn't sure he wanted to, because for a moment there she'd looked so sad. "...Nevermind," he shook his head, slightly. "Sleep well."

She tilted her head at him, curiously, but did not press him to say whatever was on his mind. "You as well, Anthony. You will need it; you have a busy day ahead of you."

He nodded in vague agreement, not sure if he was agreeing to the suggestion or only the statement. She gave him one last look before leaving. Tony listened for the elevator to take her back to the penthouse, but he never heard it.
The Wakandan Consulate, New York

T'Challa, King of Wakanda, sat at his desk in his office at the Wakandan Consulate in New York. His plane had only landed in the city a couple of hours prior and now he was currently trying to complete some overdue paperwork, before it was time for him and Barnes to head over to Stark's to meet with the others.

He was also trying to keep his mind occupied as not to start wondering what could be so important that Tony would request his presence more than a week before he was due. He knew the billionaire was not looking forward to seeing Barnes, but there was something going on, something that was important enough for Stark to put aside his own feelings and discomfort.

He was also well aware Code 47 had been called into effect some time the night before.

Whatever was going on it was obviously enough to have Tony worried, which was enough to at least have T'Challa concerned.

"Ayo?" he called to the woman standing silently in the corner. "It is nearly ten, has the car been brought around?"

"Yes, your highness," replied the young woman, stepping forward and giving a slight bow. "Abar is ready to take you whenever you are. Mr. Barnes is also prepared and waiting."

"Good," he nodded. "We'll leave in half an hour then. You and the other Dora Milaje shall remain here. Nakia should be enough."

"Of course, your majesty. If you are certain."

"I am not entering a hostile environment, Ayo," he replied as he began to tidy up the papers on his desk. "Tony Stark is a friend. There is no need for concern."

Ayo frowned as a certain redhead came to mind, but refrained from commenting just nodded and bowed once more in acknowledgement. Whatever her feelings on the matter or how polite the king was being, she knew an order when she heard one. She quietly took a step back as she waited for her king to finish what he was doing and then followed him out of the office like a shadow.

T'Challa entered the kitchen and quickly began making himself a quick snack. His staff couldn't stand when he did things like this, but he really saw no reason to have someone make him a sandwich when he was perfectly capable of making one himself.

He gave a passing nod to the silent man sitting at the island counter as he moved to the fridge to get what he needed. He gathered cold cuts, mayo, mustard and bread before shutting the fridge and grabbing a knife from the drawer and turning to lay all his bounty on the counter.

"Barnes, would you like a sandwich?" he asked, not pausing in preparing his own sandwich. "We shall be leaving soon and I have no idea how long we shall be there or when we shall get to eat next, so you might want to take the opportunity now."

"I thought you were leaving me there," replied Barnes, face neutral.

"That is the plan, yes," he nodded. "Though you make it sound as if I am abandoning you, which
couldn't be further from the truth. I will be here at the Consulate should you need me for anything, but for the rest of your recovery, what you require for that I do not have."

"But Stark does," he frowned as he eyed the king's sandwich, it was made thick with a lot of meats.

"Yes," agreed T'Challa as he looked up. Noticing the look on the other man's face and subject of his stare, he placed the completed sandwich on a plate and slid it across to him and quickly started on another. "The machine he had created was not made specifically for what you need, but it was very similar and he was willing to make the modifications necessary to help you when I asked. You can't be in better hands for this."

Barnes just eyed him silently for a moment, studying him. He wasn't surprised to see the king really believed what he was saying; he really believed Tony Stark was the best option for Barnes. He didn't know whether to laugh or hit him.

Instead he just sighed and picked up his sandwich, giving a nod in thanks. "If you say so," he rumbled before taking a large bite. It took all his will-power not to groan in ecstasy at the burst of flavors on his tongue.

"You know, James," began T'Challa as he finished his sandwich and began packing everything back up. "Forgiveness is a two-way street, but first it must begin with oneself."

Barnes frowned then. He knew what the king was trying to tell him, but he didn't understand. The other man could never understand or know just how much blood was on his hands. He could never forgive himself for that. All he could do was to make sure to never forget. And as for forgiving Stark... there was nothing to forgive and he told the other man just that.

"Stark doesn't need nor want my forgiveness, your highness," he stated as he wiped off his mouth with the napkin that was provided to him. He'd finished off his sandwich in three large bites. "He didn't do anything I wouldn't have done in his place."

T'Challa regarded him quietly for a moment as he sat to eat his sandwich. James Barnes was turning out to be not what he expected at all, he thought, as he ate. There was compassion in this man before him, not only for the people he'd been forced to kill, but also for the faceless people he'd hurt in the process. People like Anthony Stark.

In the silence that fell, T'Challa quickly finished his sandwich and put everything away before grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge, tossing one to the other man. "Maybe you are correct about Stark, but perhaps understanding without judgement can do just as well," he suggested as he came to stand beside him. "Just think about it. Come, it is time for us to be on our way."

Barnes arched a brow as the other man patted him on the shoulder than turned to leave the kitchen. He watched him walk away for a moment, the king not looking back for him once, and debated just going back to his room, but he quickly scrapped the thought and stood up, silently following the king out of the kitchen and then out to the waiting car.

James Buchannan Barnes may be many things and a lot of them he still didn't know, but what he knew he wasn't... is a coward. If this was to be his penance than he was going to meet it in whatever way it came, he thought as he climbed into the back of the car beside the king and shut the door behind him.
"So, did you get any sleep at all last night? Or am I asking a dumb question?"

Tony turned around and gave his best friend an assessing look as he entered his work shop. Now, that he was looking at him objectively he could see that Rhodey was actually doing much better than even he had thought. There was only a slight limp in his steps now. Maybe in a month or two his friend won't need the braces at all.

He really hoped so. If nothing else but that came out of all of this, Tony would be content.

"Earth to Tony, the USS Rhodey is hailing," said Rhodey, waving a hand in the other man's face after Tony had just stared at him without answering him for a few moments.

Tony blinked at the waving motion in front of his face then grabbed the offending hand and gave a light squeeze before letting go. "Your geek is showing and stop that. I'm fine and yes, I slept."

Rhodey arched a skeptical eyebrow, ignoring his comment as he eyed the slight circles under his eyes and then looked pointedly at the cup of coffee on the table beside Tony. "Wanna try again?"

Tony pouted.

"Boss slept for approximately 3 hours and seventeen minutes last night before getting up and consuming two bowls of ice cream."

Rhodey looked at him and arched a brow as he folded his arms across his chest.

Tony sighed. "No one likes a snitch, Fry."

"I do not find this statement to be completely accurate, boss, as I have very thorough data that puts my likeness factor in the 98th percentile."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Your arrogance is showing," he said to his A.I before looking back at Rhodey with a grin that was a mix of pride and self-deprecation. "Not a lie; you asked if I slept and I did. You didn't ask for how long."

"Anything less than five hours is not worth mentioning and anything less than three is a nap," he replied with a roll of his eyes.

"Hmm," hummed Tony as he turned back to his table to finish the final touches on the helmet he was working on. He completely agreed with what Rhodey said, but he wasn't about to tell him that. He relaxed when, after another silent moment, Rhodey stepped up beside him and quietly watched him. He could feel his friend was no longer annoyed with him and guessed he decided not to interrogate him any more.

"What are you working on?" he finally asked after a moment of quietly watching Tony work.

"It's the helmet for Barnes," replied Tony, reluctantly, after the silence grew too long. "Bruce and Viz finished the programming. This is all that's left."

"What does it do?"
"To create the Winter Soldier HYDRA had to first erase the man he was. To do that they had to get rid of everything that makes Barnes who he is; family, friends, life and love. We hold those things in our memories, but you can't take away a person's memories you can only suppress or block them. This," he tapped the helmet as he looked up at Rhodey then, "is going to unblock his past."

_Hopefully_, he added silently to himself. Not like there was anyone to test it on, first.

"You're hoping this will stop the Winter Soldier? Bringing back Barnes' memories?" he asked, curious and not just a little intrigued by the notion. It would be amazing if it worked.

"I don't know," shrugged Tony. "I don't really think there's any way to completely stop the Winter Soldier, short of death and neither does T'Challa or his doctors."

"Make sense I guess," nodded Rhodey in thought. "Over seventy years of brain-washing and torture I doubt can ever truly be undone, but maybe getting back who he was is the key to turning the machine back into a human."

Tony stared at him then. He wanted to feel betrayed, that Rhodey could show such compassion for the man who killed his mom, but he wouldn't be his Honey-bear if he wasn't the fair man he knew him to be. Besides, no matter how he pretended Tony just wasn't that petty. He wouldn't be doing this if he didn't have at least a little hope that it would work out for Barnes.

He may not like the guy, but he didn't wish him to remain a puppet of HYDRA's either.

Tony released a non-committal noise as he turned back to the helmet in his hands and picked up his lucky screw driver. "That sounds like the plan."

Rhodey nodded thoughtfully, not missing the long look Tony had given him before continuing what he was doing. "And what about you?"

"What about me?" he asked, pretending not to understand.

"Stupid doesn't work for you, Tones," said Rhodey before turning fully towards him, face serious. "How are you handling all of this? Knowing Barnes is going to be here in less than an hour."

Was it really going to be that soon? He'd lost track of the time, again. Tony sighed as he finished tightening the last screw. If it were anyone else asking, he'd have continued to deflect or evade until they gave up, but it was Rhodey and he knew Tony almost better than Tony knew himself and he wouldn't take any deflecting. Not when he had the look he was currently sporting on his face.

He placed the helmet down on the table, giving it a contemplative look. "If you want my honest answer, I'm not."

"Tony..."

"I can't," he clarified. He saw Rhodey opening his mouth to say something and quickly shook his head, hard, before turning his gaze on his friend. "No. I really can't. I tried, I did, but when I do all I see is his hands around my mother's throat even though she's already hurting and whispering my name... and I just can't. Maybe later, after this," he waves a hand towards the helmet with all its wires sticking out, eyes shining with moisture, "After something, I can try. Again. Try to see. Maybe Barnes and I both need to find the man behind the Soldier first."

Rhodey eyes flicked back and forth between his, silently studying as he took in everything Tony
just said. He could see the hurt and the struggle on his best friend's face as he fought to continue to see this decision through. Not for the first time he wished he could take this burden on for Tony, but he knew he couldn't. All he could do was be the brick wall Tony leaned on when he couldn't hold himself up any longer.

He sighed then and reached out a hand to grasp the back of Tony's neck, drawing him in. He gave his neck a reassuring squeeze as he pressed his forehead gently against Tony's. "Then that's what we'll do, Tones," he said before he drew him into a tight hug and pretended to not hear him sniffle. "Maybe your machine will work a miracle for you both."

Tony couldn't stop himself from holding tightly to his friend as he struggled to keep calm, fisting his hands in the back of Rhodey's shirt. "Maybe," he muttered into his shoulder as he swallowed the tears trying to clog his throat.

"Definitely," said Rhodey with confidence. "My money's always on you."

Tony just sighed and closed his eyes as he pressed his forehead to Rhodey's shoulder and just held on. He needed just one more moment and he could put his mask back on and continue pretending like he had everything under control.

"Boss? I'm sorry to interrupt..." began FRIDAY, voice quiet and definitely showing unusual concern.

Tony exhaled, heavily, before pulling back from Rhodey and looking unnecessarily to the ceiling. He made sure to avoid any eye contact. "Go ahead, Fry."

"Boss, Director Fury is here and is gathering everyone into the large conference room."

"Right," nodded Tony. It was finally time. "Is everything prepared?"

"As requested, everyone is on the line and on standby. They have all been briefed and have replied to the Code 47 that has been placed in effect. Also, King T'Challa and company have arrived and are currently making their way to said conference room."

Rhodey gave him a questioning look at what FRIDAY had just said, but Tony just shook his head and nodded for Rhodey to follow him as he headed for the elevator and the communal floor.

"Well, let's get this over with," said Tony as he exited his work shop, Rhodey just behind him. He stepped into the elevator as the lights in the shop turned off and the sliding glass door locked behind him.

Tony and Rhodey exchanged similar looks as the elevator doors closed and began to rise, taking them to the communal floor.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Nicholas Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D, sat at the head of the large conference table, elbows on the table as he rested his mouth against his fisted hands. He watched as each person, Avenger and non-Avenger, filed quietly into the room and took a seat. He found it kind of interesting that they were all choosing seats as far away from his end of the table as possible; even the ones who didn't actually know him. Though he knew all of them.

He noted even Agents Barton and Romanov were being sure to sit at the opposite end of the table. And no one, yet, seemed inclined to meet his eye. He arched his one visible brow, while Evil Nicky cackled with horrible glee on the inside.
When there was a lull in the stream of people entering the room he aimed a look at Agent Hill. "I see we're waiting on Stark, who else is missing?" He made sure to keep his eye on Hill so the others in the room knew he was not speaking to any of them yet.

Maria took a moment to look around the room then down at her list before answering. "Lt. Colonel Rhodes, Dr. Banner, Spider-Ma-"

"Here! Present! So not late," called out Spider-Man, cutting Hill off as he crawled through the doorway, clinging to the ceiling and raising his hand with a little wave - which was pointed towards the ground seeing as he was upside down. "Just for curiosity, what happens when you're late to one of these?"

"Don't be and you'll never have to find out," replied Fury with a deadpan look.

"I can work with that," nodded Peter, eyes comically wide.

Maria gave the spandex clad hero a pointed look before continuing. "Not Spider-Man, and King T'Challa who is also bringing Mr. Barnes with him, sir."

Fury opened his mouth to reply when another man dressed in a tailored charcoal suit entered the room.

"Thank you, Agent Hill," said King T'Challa from the doorway with a polite nod at the pretty brunette. "But, I too, have arrived. I do apologize if we are late and as you can see," he gestured behind him, "Mr. Barnes is with me."

Fury stood in a show of respect after the other man introduced himself. "Your highness, thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to join us. And I assure you, you're not late." His eye then fell on the dark haired man hovering behind the king. And, later, everyone would swear that the room temperature suddenly dropped ten degrees at that moment. "Mr. Barnes. If you'll both have a seat. We're just waiting on a couple more."

Soon as they both sat; both taking two of the three empty seats between Maria and Steve with the king sitting in the seat closest to Maria and Barnes taking the one right beside Steve, leaving an empty seat between them, did Stark finally enter.

"Patches, you made it!" exclaimed Tony, arms thrown wide as he entered the conference room, eyes trained on Fury. "I was beginning to think you didn't love me anymore."

"Sit down, Stark," glared Fury as he resumed his own seat. He didn't miss the look exchanged between Barnes and Steve when Tony entered the room. Nor did he miss that Tony's eyes didn't stray to that part of the table even once as he nodded at the man walking behind Tony. "Colonel."

He inwardly smirked when Stark immediately made a b-line for the empty seat to his left, right across from Hill, Rhodes taking the seat right next to him.

"Now, that we're all here," began Fury as the door to the room quietly slid closed, "for those of you who don't know who I am, my name is Nicholas Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D, you can call me Fury." He made sure to make eye contact with every single person at the table he didn't know personally.

"Good, now the introduction are out of the way we can move on," grinned Fury, his smile did not reach his eyes and no one felt courageous enough to point out that the "introduction" was a bit one sided. "But before we get to why Stark found it necessary to interrupt my vacation and summon me here, I have something else I need to address."
Fury paused then and slowly looked around the room, making sure he caught everyone's eye this time and that they all saw the sharp edge in his gaze. He noted more than a few trying not to fidget while he stared them all down.

Time to kick some asses, he thought as he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Ladies, Gentlemen," he smiled then. "Let's talk Civil War. Who wants to be first to tell me why I shouldn't just get rid of all of you and find a remote location to bury your bodies that only I know? Rogers? How about you start."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this posting is BS. That took entirely too long... AO3 I need you guys to fix this. Please???
Chapter X

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter X:

Previously...

Fury paused then and slowly looked around the room, making sure he caught everyone's eye this time and that they all saw the sharp edge in his gaze. He noted more than a few trying not to fidget while he stared them all down.

Time to kick some asses, he thought as he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Ladies, Gentlemen," he smiled then. "Let's talk Civil War. Who wants to be first to tell me why I shouldn't just get rid of all of you and find a remote location to bury your bodies that only I know? Rogers? How about you start."

Steve froze at the sound of his name. Looking up, he met the steel gaze of Nick Fury and he knew immediately that nothing he said was going to matter. Fury was pissed. All Steve could hear in his head was, "Let's talk Civil War" over and over. He knew from experience that Fury only asked when he already knew the answer, so he figured it was probably safe to assume that the Director knew everything that had happened ten months ago.

Which meant Fury wasn't looking for a recap, he wanted an explanation.

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat, looking around at everyone else. Straightening up as he looked back at Fury, he threw a glance at the man beside him, but Bucky wasn't looking at him either. It didn't escape his attention that no one else at the table was looking in his direction or willing to meet his gaze.

"I didn't see any other options," he finally said into the silence, jaw flexing with undisguised nerves.

Fury just stared at him, silent and still for a long moment before he suddenly blinked his one visible eye. "You... didn't see any other option," he repeated slowly, as if studying the words individually for a hidden meaning. "Okay," he nods, "we'll start there; what was your mission?"

Steve tilts his head at him, a little confused. "I- I don't... What mission?"

"Your goal, Rogers. What. Was. Your. Goal?"

"I..." Steve tried, but he wasn't sure what to say. What was his goal? To protect Bucky. But he didn't think Fury wanted to hear that...

"I'm assuming you must have had a goal here, Rogers," said Fury as he uncrossed his arms and leaned forward to rest his arms on the table. "I can't imagine that you rescued a wanted criminal, destroyed an airport and became an international terrorist, taking half the Avengers with you - one being a former agent of mine - for no reason and no goal in mind. So, I'm asking you again, Rogers, what was the mission goal?"
Barnes shifted uneasily as he looked around him at everyone else, but no one seemed inclined to say anything to help Steve out. They were leaving him to handle Fury on his own even though this wasn't all just on Steve. It's not like he forced any of them to follow him, dammit. He gritted his teeth in obvious frustration.

Tony and Kisa were the only ones willing to look Steve's way.

Steve's jaw flexed. He didn't know what to say that would appease Fury.

"I'm just trying to understand here, Rogers," spoke up Fury when it seemed Steve was not going to say anything more. Steve's jaw ticked. "You see I was under the impression I created a team of heroes, not a bunch of fucking infants!" he ended in a yell, slamming his fist on the table in anger. "Apparently, being led by the most infantile of them all! Do I look like a fucking babysitter to you people?"

Steve stiffened in his seat at the unexpected insult, while a few others shifted in their seats, uneasily.

"Oh, I'm sorry Rogers, do you disagree with something I said?" he asked, noticing the look on the other man's face. "I once would have disagreed, too. The Captain America I knew would have never put innocent lives in danger, harbored a criminal and basically told the goddamn world to kiss his ass."

"Well I'm not Captain America anymore."

"No shit," replied Fury, not giving an inch. "When I say Captain fucking America I'm talking about Steve Rogers. It's nothing but a name and suit without the man behind it. It meant something because the man who wore it believed in something greater than his goddamn self."

"He was innocent," spoke Steve, quietly into the silence that fell between them.

Fury's eye narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"I said he was innocent," spoke up Steve after a moment in determination, flicking his eyes toward Bucky. "He was being framed. I couldn't let them throw him in jail when he was innocent. I had to prove that he didn't set that bomb and kill all those people."

"That wasn't your choice to make, Rogers," said Fury with a glare. He slowly straightened and crossed his arms over his chest as he regarded Steve for a moment. "So this was about protecting your friend," his eye flicked to the man in question, who was sitting stock still and very quiet beside Steve. "That was your goal."

"You'd have done the same if it was your family," declared Steve, meeting his gaze with a determined stare.

"No, Rogers, I wouldn't have," said Fury, eyes hard. "I'd have done it better."

Barnes shifted ever so slightly when Fury's eye fell on him, but he didn't say anything. Truthfully, he was having a bit of a hard time being in the room with Fury. He'd never had an assignment of his live before other than Steve, but Steve he had chosen to stop going after, even saved. Same couldn't be said about Fury.

"Maybe so, but it doesn't change that he was innocent," repeated Steve, oblivious to what was going on in the head of said man beside him.
"This time," agreed Fury and Steve's eyes cut to him, sharply. He arched a brow. "What? You want to pretend Barnes is some saint or damsel in distress, go right ahead. I'm not under any such illusions. And the next time you want to play knight in shining-fucking-armor for your boyfriend by destroying shit or starting a war remember you're back on my watch now and I will put you down, permanently, super soldier serum or not. You once accused me of having secrets and you were right, I have a lot of secrets and I know a lot of things. Don't test me on this." He looked at Barnes then. "That goes for you both. Do I make myself clear?"

Barnes just stared at him as Steve's jaw flexed once more before he nodded. "Crystal."

"You believe he's redeemed? Fine. Prove it to me." He turned his gaze on Barnes then. "Right now, I'm not convinced. I still have half a mind to put a bullet in you myself. More than half as I do owe you one as I recall. Someone I respect and who has more say in the matter than I do has vouched for you though and, understanding your circumstances, I'm willing to go on a little faith. So prove him right, Mr. Barnes. Please. But understand I'm watching and my sympathies only go so far."

"You should be aware, Rogers, that Barnes isn't the only one here who needs to prove something to me; the Steve Rogers I knew would have never left a man down and behind."

Suddenly, the air in the room seemed to have frozen over as the silence grew to an uncomfortable level. Steve made sure not to look in Tony's direction as he swallowed heavily and focused his eyes on the table.

Fury stared at both of them for a moment longer before he turned to look around at everyone else. "Matter of fact, that goes for all of you. You sign The Accords, consider yourselves on my probation. Fuck up like this again and I will fuck ya'll shit up. There will be nowhere for you to run and hide. I will find you and when I'm through you won't know your heads from your asses. Am I clear?"

He waited to see everyone's head nodding before he sat back down with a frown. "Good. Get your shit together, people. I am no one's babysitter." He looked down and tapped on the screen on the electronic pad in front of him. "That goes double for you, Barnes."

"You don't have to keep doing that, Nick," said Steve, frustration finally showing in his voice. He flicked his gaze to Bucky before looking back at Fury and clarifying when he saw his eyebrow lifted. "Singling him out like that. We proved he was innocent. I know I fucked up, but you don't have to take it out on Bucky."

"I don't huh?" said Fury, looking at him thoughtfully then nodding. "And no, Steve, you didn't prove shit. Stark did," he added, folding his hands together. "Stark was the one who proved him innocent and Stark was the one who got him pardoned on his charge of war crimes and terrorism, among others. With the help of Agent Romanov and Ms. Potts. Not you, not any of you, because you all ran away and hid from the shit-storm you created. All you all proved is that maybe you should be in a cell beside him."

Just then he saw Bucky shift in his seat, eyes cutting to him before returning their focus to the table. He watched as a muscle in the soldier's jaw flexed, repeatedly, before he gave him an inquiring look. "You have something you'd like to add, Mr. Barnes?"

Bucky gave a slight shake of his head, uncomfortable now that the attention was centered on him.

"Hmm," hummed Fury as he watched the other man. "Since we're on the subject, Mr. Barnes, understand that once you've proven to me that you have control and are not a danger to everyone
on this planet and if you choose, you will be welcome to sign the Accords and become an
Avenger." He waited a beat before adding, "I'm going to be honest with you, I don't like you and I
have a very strong urge to kill you myself. You killed Maria Stark; she was a very good friend. I
don't have many of those and because of you I now have one less. I can be just as irrational as
Rogers. Be very glad I didn't find out about that until after you'd been placed on ice in Wakanda.
That being said, you get a handle on that little issue of yours and you think you can handle being
an Avenger, you come see me."

Bucky eyed the other man curiously for a moment then nodded. He could easily see that his "I
don't like you" was a huge understatement. It was probably more accurate to say the man hated
him, but he was still willing to let him be an Avenger with Steve if he chose - and for that he was
grateful. He already knew Steve was going to sign; Steve wouldn't be there, otherwise. He
wondered about Wilson though as he gave said man sitting across from him a fleeting look.

Fury frowned at the other man as he ignored the sharp look that he saw Stark shoot him from
the corner of his eye. He knew what caught Stark's attention, but that was not a discussion he was
willing to have right now nor in front of present company, so he continued with his agenda and
didn't return Stark's look. "Alright, let's talk Accords. Other than Ms. Maximoff," he nodded at the
redhead, "has any of you made a decision?"

When both Barton and Lang raised their hands he arched a brow. "Put your goddamn hands
down! This ain't fucking high school. Do I look like a motherfucking teacher to you two?"

"Kind of feels like the Principal's Office though," muttered Clint while Scott fidgeted, not liking
being put on the spot.

"Barton," snapped Fury, hearing his mutter and, thus, giving him his full attention. Clint
immediately slouched down in his seat on the other side of Steve, trying to hide behind the
blonde's broad frame. "How's retirement treating you? The farm? How's Laura and the kids?" he
asked as he stared at the ex-agent. "Oh wait, you don't know. You're too busy running behind
Rogers. I know because Lila called me no less than seventeen times."

Clint quickly sat up and forward at that, eyes narrowing. "You telling me my daughter called you
for help?"

"I'm telling you my goddaughter called her godfather because she couldn't call her dad," Fury
replied. "Seems a seven year old has more sense than one of my best former agents. Want to tell
me what the hell you were thinking following in behind Rogers when you are clearly no longer an
agent? You're damn lucky you're not sitting in a jail cell right now."

"Cap needed help," he answered with a shrugged, trying to look like he wasn't nervous at all as he
nodded his head in Wanda's direction across the table from him. "He needed me to get the kid out,
because Stark had put her on house arrest."

Fury looked over at the unknown redhead then at Stark and then back to Ms. Maximoff before
pressing his lips in a thin line as he frowned. "You're the one who fucked up in Lagos, right?
Killed all those scientists from Wakanda," he said, standing and watching as she flinched violently
before meeting his gaze for a moment and looking quickly away. "The public was calling for her
head, thought she should pay for what she did. The whole reason the Accords were finally put in
place, in fact."

He folded his hands together behind his back as he began to walk around the table, some shifting in
the silence to watch him while others continued to avert their eyes. He stopped right behind the
redhead, eyes trained across the table on Steve.
Natasha, Tony and Rhodes were the only ones to look in T'challa's direction; each assessing if the young king was alright.

Wanda stiffened, eyes flitting around the room as she suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable.

"Now me? I'm wondering why was she even there," Fury asked suddenly, breaking the silence and making Wanda jump. "I read the reports. Seems to me she wasn't ready for the field."

"She's strong," replied Steve. "We needed her."

"I don't care if she's the strongest damn woman on the goddamn planet, Rogers, if she can't control it she's a liability. End of story. You know that," he said, voice hard. "You're not a wet behind the ears, green recruit. She had no business being there. Period."

Steve's jaw ticked with suppressed annoyance as he ground his teeth in frustration. He knew Fury was right, but he'd be damned if he was going to say so. "I thought she could handle it. She did good in Sokovia."

Clint shifted uneasily in his seat, the only one who knew that wasn't exactly correct.

"Did you?" he asked, unconvinced. "Or did you just not want to ask for help?"

Steve eyes narrowed at him then. He knew what - or should he say who Fury was referring to and it was starting to make him angry as it wasn't true; he really had thought Wanda was ready. "Yes, I did and no, he had taken a break, retired."

Fury arched a brow. "Well, we both know you don't let a little thing like retirement stop you from asking for help." He started walking again, coming to a stop at the end of the table.

Steve opened his mouth to reply when suddenly Fury froze. He watched as the other man's exposed eye began to tick as his jaw seemed to harden and frowned at him. He looked agitated and not just a little annoyed. The Director was already pissed, but this look like something more... Steve looked around at everyone else, curiously, but they were all looking at Fury also with questioning looks on their faces.

He had just noticed Wanda's eyes glowing red and was opening his mouth to say something to the young woman when suddenly Clint jumped up out of his seat beside him with a shout.

"Whoa!"

Not a second later, Wanda suddenly slumped down in her seat, a small dart protruding from her neck. Steve eyes widened as he turned to look in the direction the dart came from, right at Fury, who was currently putting his weapon back in the holster strapped to his right thigh.

Steve blinked. He'd never even seen his arm move and he was certain Fury didn't even turn his gaze to look where he was aiming.

"Holy shit," breathed out Clint as he slid back down into his seat, eyes wide. Phil had always told him that Fury was really good with a gun, but he'd never thought the other man was that good. He thought it was testament to the type of lives they lead that, besides him and Scott -who'd startled in his seat beside Wanda - and Maria, who'd audibly sighed, they were the only ones to visibly show any reaction.

Bruce and Thor arched an identical brow and exchanged looks.
"Was that really necessary?" asked Steve, brows rising towards his hairline.

"I don't like rude telepaths," replied Fury, unapologetically. "Next time she'll ask first."

Suddenly the door flew open and everyone turned to look at the man and woman standing in the door way.

Nakia relaxed as her eyes immediately found her king and realized he was not hurt, silently putting her blade away. She'd heard the shot from outside the door and immediately responded to the potential threat, after a voice from somewhere had tried to assure her that her king was not in any danger. She still needed to confirm that for herself. When the king met her gaze and gave her a nod she bowed and quietly left the room, noting the tension in the air as a few of the people in the room stood up, staring at the man who'd come inside with her.

She had no idea who he was, but it was apparent that his presence was causing a commotion. Nakia gave her king one last glance before leaving the room completely to return to her post.

Everyone stared at the newcomer as he took in the scene around him. He noticed the slumped young woman before looking at his boss and friend with an arched brow.

Fury returned his questioning look with one of his own.

"I thought you might have tranked the Captain," he replied evenly, face neutral.

"Not yet," replied Fury, crossing his arms.

"Hmm. And the woman?"

"Telepath."

"Ah. She?"

"She tried."

"Rude."

Fury nodded. "You're early."

"I noticed," he also nodded.

"Phil?" cut in Clint, not being able to keep quiet anymore.

Phil Coulson sighed inwardly as he turned to look at his former agent and friend. "Barton."

"Wha--- How?" Clint eyes flicked back and forth between the two men. "I don't understand? You're dead."

"Not anymore," said Phil, dismissively. Now was not the time to get into his death and subsequent resurrection.

"For how long?" spoke up Natasha, face carefully blank.

Phil eyed her for a moment, knowing she wasn't going to like the answer. "Five years, give or take."

She stared at him for a moment then looked at Fury before nodding and sitting back down.
"Son of Coul," exclaimed Thor, loudly, coming forward to embrace the smaller man. "I am overjoyed to see that my brother's attack did not permanently fell you. Your absence has been felt. You must let us know how this joyous occasion has come to pass!"

Phil grimaced and wheezed as the giant blonde finally placed him back on his feet. Well, he could cancel his appointment with the chiropractor he thought, as he straightened his suit jacket and tilted his head to crack his neck. "Thank you, Thor," he said, giving him a small smile. "I think we can save the details for another time."

He turned to look at everyone else then. He could see that they all had questions and it was taking a lot of restraint for them not to attack him with them, but he hoped they also knew now was not the time. Phil made sure to meet each of their gazes, those five he knew wanted answers, before speaking. "Understand that not telling you before now was my decision and only mine. Anything else we can address later."

"Just one question; does Pepper know?" asked Tony, hands firmly in his pockets as he stared at the agent, waiting.

"Not yet," replied Phil.

"Hm," he nodded, "your funeral. Again." He sat down, not addressing his own feelings on the matter. He had no feelings about it; Coulson was a spy just like Fury. He wasn't surprised. "You should know she cried. It was lovely, by the way. Hope whatever it was wasn't a one-time use."

"Shut up, Tony."

Tony turned his head to look at Barton then, their eyes meeting. Surprisingly to everyone, Tony did just that. After staring at the other man for a moment he just quietly sat back down and pulled out his phone. Effectively ignoring everyone. They all just assumed that Tony realized he wasn't helping the situation or that he was some kind of insulted, but the truth was neither of those. Simple fact was Tony went quiet and sat down for one reason; Clint had used his name. Not Stark, Tony. It was the first time since they returned from Wakanda that Clint had addressed him that way and it had taken Tony by surprise.

Deciding this was the perfect time to start tuning everyone out, Tony initiated a game of Evil Apples while at the same time he opened up the note app; he was still curious if he could write a pangram that was more likely to be said by someone than the brown fox one. Really? When would anyone say that?

"You okay, Tones?" asked Rhodes, quietly as he leaned over towards his friend. It was unusual for Tony to not give a ready come back and he only shut up when he wanted to not when someone told him to.

"Fine," assured Tony, absently. They were only going to talk about the Accords now and he saw no reason Fury and Coulson couldn't handle that part on their own. Honestly, if he didn't have to be here for what was to come he'd leave - or not have shown up at all. He pretended not to notice the curious looks aimed his way from around the table as Coulson took the empty seat next to the king, leaving the only other empty seat between him and Barnes.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he suddenly felt one of Rhodey's sharp elbows digging into his side. He flinched slightly and sent his BFF a disgruntled look; he had yet to make a good pangram and it was his turn as judge on Evil Apples. Didn't he see that he was busy?

Rhodey ignored his look with practiced ease, just gave a nod of his head and flicked his eyes down
and across the table. Tony lift his brow in question then followed the action with his eyes.

His gaze landed on Steve.

Rogers was currently standing, arms crossed over his impressive chest. He seemed to be trying to stare down Fury from what Tony could tell when he followed Steve's gaze to the other man, who'd returned to his seat at the head of the table at some point while Tony wasn't paying attention.

He flicked another questioning look at Rhodey as he decided to tune in when Steve started speaking.

"That's not what I'm saying," frowned Steve, frustrated. "I know people need to be protected, that's the whole reason we go out there. I'm saying it's unrealistic for the World Security Council and The UN and whoever else to expect us to be able to save everyone and neutralize the threat."

Rhodey nudged him again, a bit more insistently, and he didn't have to look at the other man to know that he wanted Tony to stop the brewing argument before it could get any further.

"How about we shelve this discussion for after and get to the reason why we're all here?" Tony quickly cut in before Fury could reply to Steve. "Let's just assume, for now, that everyone who hasn't signed The Accords will and get to why Thor has returned. I have a few people on the line who I've invited to the discussion and I think they've been holding long enough. FRIDAY?"

"Of course, boss," replied the A.I. as a large flat screen TV slowly descended from the ceiling at the front of the room. It was curved in the middle and had to be every bit of 90" in length. Fury gave him an assessing look before rolling his chair to the side beside Maria and turned around so as to see the screen without having to twist in his chair.

Everyone watched in silence as the screen lit up blue then a moment later six people came into view, the screen broken into three equal sections with two people staring back at them in each. In the first section, there was a beautiful woman in a purple gown with flaming red hair standing beside a handsome man, who was sitting and sporting a severe jaw line. They both had crowns on their heads. In the middle screen were two older gentlemen, one bald with soft blue eyes and sitting, and the other standing behind him with a head full of almost silver hair and his hands clasped behind his back. They were both dressed in tailored suits and quite striking to look at. And in the last section stood two who really didn't need an introduction to most in the room. The blonde woman had a gentle smile on her face as she stood next to the distinguished man in glasses with graying temples.

"Tony, its so good to see you," spoke the blonde woman with a smile. "How are you, honey? We saw you on the news. Ben was biting at the bit to get out there and help you though you didn't hear that from me."

"You as well, Sue," he grinned and replied. "I'm doing well all things considered. I'll get Grimm to admit he likes me, just you watch." He looked at the man beside her then. "Richards."

"Stark," replied the man, crossing his arms as they stared each other down. "Stop flirting with my wife."

"I would never." said Tony, feigning affront. It was unclear whether he was denying the accusation or the demand though. He looked to the others on the screen then.

"Professor, Lehnsherr," he nodded at the two men who easily returned his nod, the bald man with a smile.
"Anthony," said the sitting man while the other remained silent, only giving a slight nod in acknowledgement.

"And your majesties," said Tony as he looked to the two wearing crowns. The redhead and the man both nodded in returned greeting, but didn't speak.

"I guess I should introduce everyone before I turn this over to Thor," said Tony turning to look at everyone in the room with him. "I know I don't have to tell most of you who these two are," he gestured to the blonde woman and the man. "Susan and Reed Richards a.k.a The Invisible Woman and Mister Fantastic of the Fantastic Four. Their team took up a lot of the slack when the Avengers were... out of commission."

"In the middle, you have Professor Charles Xavier, leader and founder of the X-Men and Mr. Erik Lehnsherr a.k.a Magneto, they are also two of the strongest mutants on the planet. They've also helped take up the slack left by the Avengers."

"At the end there you have Queen Medusalith and King Blackagar Boltagon of the Inhumans. Many also know them as Medusa and Black Bolt. Everyone, Director Fury, Agents Maria Hill and Phil Coulson of S.H.I.E.L.D, King T'Challa of Wakanda and, of course, The Avengers."

Various hellos and nods rang out around the table and from the screen.

"Neither the Inhumans nor the mutant community have been asked to sign The Accords, but they all know of what happened in New York and have offered their aid should another threat arise, which brings us to why we are all here. And since I'm also in the dark I'll just turn this over to Thor now. Thor?"

Thor suddenly stepped forward from where he stood near the left hand corner of the room next to Bruce and Vision when Tony turned to him. He looked to the people on the screen, now directly in front of him, and nodded.

"Thank you, friend Tony," he nodded at the engineer before looking back at the screen. "I am Thor, son of King Odin of Asgard. I am honored to make your acquaintance though I regret it is under these circumstances."

"And what circumstances are those?" asked the bald man with a slight nod.

"I will not mince words with you as I'm sure you must have all gathered by now Midgard is in grave danger."

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

_The Palace in Nornheim_

Stephen Strange stared back at the tall brunette woman, meeting her stare unflinchingly. She was tall in her heeled boots and thick, long, dark hair with piercing deep blue eyes. He would have thought her beautiful if, and truthfully she was, if not for the coldness in her face. She wore a deep red gown with gold accents that left her breast on display and had two wide splits, one on either side all the way up to her hips. But of everything it was her headdress that really caught his
attention.

It was... big. Ridiculously so. And he couldn't. Stop. Staring.

Karnilla, Queen of the Norns, watched the man in front of her with more than a little interest. She couldn't help finding the human male intriguing. It wasn't every day that a human stepped out of a portal directly into her throne room.

She didn't even sense him coming before he was already there.

And he was human. Did she mention that?

She sat back down and crossed her legs as she absently waved her guards away. He may be a sorcerer of some talent, she'd give him that, but she doubted she had much to fear from him.

"So you say you need to speak with me," she said as she leaned her head on her fist, eyes still on him. "I'm intrigued enough to entertain you. Speak. Tell me why you have come to me, Sorcerer."

Stephen arched a brow at her command, but refrained from commenting. "You are the one who trained Enchantress, are you not? So thus, it is you she would come to for aid."

"Perhaps," she replied, silently wondering what this human had to do with Amora. Her ex-pupil was not overly fond of humans last she remembered.

"Let's not waste each other's time, please. Enchantress has placed a sleep spell on King Odin, an ancient spell, Norn in origin and we both know that she doesn't have the knowledge nor the power to accomplish such a spell on her own. But you do."

So that's who the foolish little idiot's target was, thought Karnilla as she regarded the unknown man. And it sounded like the little whore's plan worked... She'd laugh if it wasn't so pathetic. How Odin-King fell for.... Hn. No. The old man was many things, but he was far from stupid, which meant Amora had help.

Or more likely she was the help.

Which meant that demon spawn, Loki, was most likely the one behind it all.

Karnilla visibly frowned at that. Amora used her to help Loki... the fool had to have known she would find out... so, why would Amora risk her wrath? What was the little bimbo up to? Hmm, she'd find out soon enough, but first things first.

"This is all quite intriguing, little Sorcerer," she said, standing and slowly making her way towards him. "But none of this tells me why you are in my palace."

Stephen arched a brow as she came to stop right in front of him. He knew she was trying to intimidate him, but unfortunately for her he was not the type to be intimidated easily. Never had been. Apparently, his arrogance was too thick to be easily penetrated, or so many who called themselves his friends liked to tell him. Often.

"I assumed that was obvious; I'm here for the antidote or spell to wake him. I am not proficient in Norn magic, though I could be given very little time. We do not have the time. Well, I don't have the time. Maybe later after we handle the coming threat. Right now, we need to make sure the Nine Realms stay protected and for that we need the king awake and on his throne where he belongs."
"Coming threat?" she asked, now curious.

He folded his hands behind him, his cloak waving out of the way and snapping the air. Obviously it was as impatient as it's chosen master. "I'm certain you will understand soon."

"I like you," Karnilla said, eyeing him. She almost smiled as he blinked at her in a mixture of surprise and doubt. "You enter my throne room undetected and brimming with power that I can almost taste it on you. I was going to make you fight me for whatever it is you came for, but I have changed my mind. I will give you what it is you seek on one condition."

"And that is?"

"Just a little bargain," she smiled and surprisingly the action almost reached her eyes. Now he was a little apprehensive as he felt a slight shiver run down his back. "As I said, I will give you what you want and all you have to do is to promise me a favor."

"A favor?"

"Yes, a favor," she confirmed. "One of my choosing at any time I so wish and no matter how you may feel about it once asked you must honor it." She eyed him for another silent moment then turned and walked back to her throne. She gracefully sat and crossed her legs. "Do we have a bargain, Sorcerer?"

Stephen took a moment to silently weigh his options. He didn't like it. He didn't like the thought of owing this woman anything, but he didn't see any other choice. He could train himself in the way of the Norns, but their magic was very old and much of it not found in any book any longer. There was no guarantee he would learn what he needed to wake the king...

"How long is he meant to sleep?"

"Depends how much he was given. I gave Amora enough to cover a decade; a mere nap for an Asgardian." And now that she thought about it, almost half that time had passed. Has Odin been asleep all this time? She'd not heard anything and she was certain Balder would have mentioned something... so, if Odin has been asleep, who was sitting on his throne? And right under Heimdall's eyes?

He frowned. He didn't like the look that suddenly appeared in the queen's eyes. Nothing good could come from that look. "I accept, but I have one stipulation; you can't ask me to kill or help you kill any one or thing."

She arched a brow. He was here for her assistance yet was making stipulations on what she required as payment? His audacity amused her. Soon, she would find out if he was as powerful as he was confident.

"I'm feeling generous; fine, we are agreed." Like she required anyone's help in killing, anyway. She raised her hand in front of her as it began to glow with a dark purple light. She twisted it in the air, her fingers spread, then closed it into a fist with her palm facing her.

Stephen blinked when a small pouch appeared in the air in front of his face. Slowly he reached a hand up to take it as he raised a questioning look on her.

"Take that. If he is paralyzed put some of it in liquid and feed it to him," she instructed. "If he merely sleeps he need only inhale it. Now go. There's someone I must extract an explanation from and it had better be a good one."
Stephen blinked, but decided not to ask. He silently opened a portal back to the Sanctum then gave her a slight bow. "Thank you for this. I have a feeling I'm going to regret it, but I guess I'll cry about that when I have to."

"What are you called, Human?" she called out just before he stepped through the portal.

He looked over his shoulder at her. "Dr. Strange," he replied then nodded and stepped through the opening. Stark was going to owe him big for this.

Karnilla watched with interest as the man disappeared, thinking his name was quite fitting. Opening portals was not an easy task, yet he did it with great ease... She was looking forward to seeing this Dr. Strange again. She sighed and stood before slowly making her way to her bedroom. For now, though, the mystery of the human sorcerer had to wait, she needed to find out what her ex-pupil was up to first.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Thor looked around at his friends as they all gave him their undivided attention. "As some of you know, after the battle of Sokovia I became suspicious that our actions were being manipulated by outside forces. It was becoming apparent to me that someone or something was forcing us to gather the Infinity Gems and I soon left The Avengers and Midgard to find out if I was correct and if so, to discern who they were and for what purpose."

"I'm guessing since you've returned you've found something," said Fury as he watched the blonde god with interest. "Were you correct?"

"Unfortunately, my friend, I was," sighed Thor as he crossed his arms over his massive chest. "Someone or something has been manipulating us into collecting the gems, but I do not know who or for what purpose."

"Well, maybe we can figure this out. What exactly is an Infinity Gem?" asked Reed Richards from the screen.

"The Infinity Gems are six stones possessing extreme power that were created by four of the Cosmic Entities. They are older than time itself and are each tied to different aspects of the universe. They have the ability to destroy and create galaxies. There would be no limit to what one could do if they were to wield all six gems. And no stopping them."

The room went deathly quiet as everyone exchanged knowing looks. There was no question as to why someone would be after such power. Question was what did this person who wanted the gems plan to do with them?

"Alright, I think we can all guess why someone would be after these gems, what makes you certain this person is coming to Earth?" asked Sue Storm, crossing her arm.

"Because I am quite certain, my lady, that the last two gems are somewhere here on Midgard," replied Thor.

"Wait, what?" asked Tony as he stood. "What do you mean "the last two"? And why are you so sure they're here?"
Thor sighed as he fleetingly wondered if he should reveal all, but answered anyway. He'd come here for this purpose. "My father, King Odin, once told me that the gems have a need to be together; that they will seek each other to the point of orchestrating events to achieve this goal. One is even rumored to be sentient. Since I know three were discovered here or very near Midgard and the fourth reported to have been found by one who originates from here, I can only assume the last two will most likely be found here as well. And I appear to not be the only one who believes this."

"And where are these gems now?" asked Fury, face unreadable.

Thor eyed the one-eyed man warily for a moment before answering. "One, the Space Gem, resides within the Tesseract. It is still safe on Asgard. The Reality Gem, which gave the Aether it's power was given to the Collector to keep safe after my battle in your land of England. Father did not believe it wise for two of the Gems to be kept so close together. Unfortunately, The Collector's place was destroyed not too long ago and the location of the gem is now unknown. Another, the Power Gem, I have an idea of it's whereabouts, but it will require my Father to retrieve that one, if necessary. The fourth, the Mind Gem... is there," he turned and pointed directly at Vision.

Or more specifically, to the yellow gem on his forehead.

Vision stepped forward and nodded at the people on the screen.

"You have one of these gems, but do not have it locked away for safe keeping?" asked Queen Medusa, translating her husband's hand movements.

"My lady, I assure you there is no safer place for the Mind Gem than where it currently sits. Vision has proven himself more than up to the task," said Thor as he looked at the two royals. "If I did not believe this I would not have left it here."

"That's three," spoke up Tony, taking the attention away from Vision, as he looked around him before focusing back on Thor. "You said you no longer know where the Reality Gem is at, so that is three gems unaccounted for."

Thor frowned. "Aye, friend Tony, you are correct."

"And you're sure whoever is looking for them is coming here?" asked Fury.

"I am certain, my friend," he nodded. "There are whispers. No one will speak a name, no matter how I've tried, they are all afraid, but it has not gone unnoticed that at least three of the gems were found here. Odin once said that only beings of immense power can hope to wield even one of the gems. I can only imagine the power of someone who believes they can use all six."

"Or the arrogance..." breathed Maria, a frown marring her pretty face.

"And apparently with the power to back it up," added Tony, punching in something on his phone and not looking up.

"Then it sounds to me the first thing we need to do is find those gems," spoke Erik Lehnsherr for the first time.

"Erik?" asked Charles as he turned to look at the other man.

"Think about it Charles, we have a powerful, unknown alien coming here for these gems. Do you really think he's going to ask for them nicely? It sounds like they've been playing at this for quite some time and whoever they are their endgame is coming. I don't think we want to be caught
"He makes a valid point," said Medusa with an arched brow as she placed a hand on her husband's shoulder, who was nodding in agreement.

"We can't even be sure these gems are here." said Clint with huff. "How the hell are we supposed to find them?"

"They're here," spoke Vision at the same time as Tony began speaking.

"I think I can handle that with Vision's help," said Tony with shrug. He was sure he could build a program that could search out the power signatures of the gems. Shouldn't be too hard if they were really that rare. "I think we also need to find out who's coming and exactly how much time we have. If we've been being manipulated all this time then I think it's safe to assume we're also being watched, at least to some extent. I imagine the faster we find these gems the faster our guest shows up."

"If I remember correctly, the Mind Gem that Vision now has came from Loki's scepter," spoke up Natasha, looking first at Tony then Thor. "So where'd he get it?"

"Loki said the staff was given to him by the same one who gave him the Chitauri army," said Thor with a blink, getting a very sick feeling in his stomach.

Bruce, Clint, Steve, Rhodey, Tony, Natasha, Fury and Maria all exchanged identical looks of dread as the silence grew around them.

"Who are Loki and the Chitauri?" asked Susan into the silence, noticing the tense look on some of the faces of the people on the screen she and her husband was watching.

"Remember the aliens who attacked New York?" asked Tony as he turned to look at them. All six of them nodded. "Those were the Chitauri and they were being led by Loki."

"We need to know exactly who he got that stick from," said Tony, eyeing the giant blonde.

"Aye," agreed Thor with a nod. He wished he could turn to his father, if only for his council.

Clint crossed his arms as he stared down at the table. A very bad feeling was starting to crawl through him. "Thor, didn't you once tell us that whoever had been pulling Loki's strings also had him scared shitless?" He looked up at the Asgardian then. "I know for a fact your brother is not one who scares easily, so could this be some sort of revenge?"

Thor blinked as he stared at Barton, deciding this was not the time to pretend he didn't understand Midgardian colloquialism. "Aye, that is true; Loki was afeard of someone. He would not cease his attack on Midgard even with the offer of my aid."

"Brother?" asked Medusa as she exchanged a look with her husband, but went unnoticed.

"Still doubtful," said Fury at the same time, looking between Barton and Thor. "You forget, we had the Tesseract for more than 60 years and that's not including how long it was in other hands before ours. Your brother was a pawn, just like the rest of us."

"Do you think..." spoke up Steve and trailing off as he looked at Bucky before he looked up, directly at Fury. "Do you think this could go as far back as the Red Skull? The Tesseract does."

Nick sighed, thinking for a moment. "It's possible. No one knows what happened to the Red..."
Skull. It's widely believed he died in the same crash that you were believed to have died in."

Steve blinked then. "He didn't," he shook his head. "He was sucked through a black hole or something created by the Tessaract. When the plane finally crashed I was the only one left. And the Tessaract."

"That... could be a problem."

"You think the Red Skull could still be alive?" he asked him in disbelief.

"At the moment, Rogers, I'm not willing to rule anything out," said Fury as he leaned back in his seat and arched a brow, his eye glancing at Barnes for a moment. "And I'd advise all of you to do the same."

Steve and Bucky exchanged uneasy looks as realization dawned on both of them. "Shit."

"Well that certainly rules out Loki," spoke up Bruce, looking around at them all before turning to Thor. "He may be intelligent, I'll give him that, but what you guys are proposing requires patience. Decades of patience. That's not the Loki we know."

"Okay, so I take it we're all in agreement its best we find these gems first?" asked Reed and after a moment everyone nodded. "Alright. I'll see what I can do or find out on my end. I say we all meet back up to touch bases in a week unless something comes up. Agreed?"

"This is agreeable," replied Queen Medusa. "We will also see what we can learn. Until then," she and Black Bolt nodded. "It was nice meeting you all. Anthony, we will be in touch."

The screen went black while Tony was still nodding then the other two images moved and grew bigger. Tony looked to Sue and Reed then. "Richards, I'll have FRIDAY send you a copy of all the data I have on the Mind Gem."

He nodded. "That should give me somewhere to start. We'll be in touch. I don't have to tell you all to watch yourselves. Richards out."

"Take care, Tony," waved Sue just before their screen also went blank and the only ones left on the screen now were Professor Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr.

"I guess we'll be going too, Anthony," smiled Charles from the screen. "I think I may know someone who can help shed some light on these gems as well. I'll let you know. Also, contact me when you have decided on that other issue we spoke of. I would like to be of help, if I can."

"Thank you, Professor, I will."

"It was a pleasure to meet you all," said Charles aiming his gaze at the rest of the occupants in the room then. "I hope we shall meet again. Goodbye."

Lehnsherr gave a slight nod then they were gone.

"Can we trust them?" asked Maria, looking from Tony to Fury and back. "The Inhumans I mean? How do we know they won't try to keep one or all the gems for themselves?"

"We don't know," shrugged Tony, nonchalant. In his mind the Inhumans were the least of their problems. "Common goals rule."

"What?"
"Anthony is saying that you all have a common interest in seeing this through," replied Kisa, speaking for the first time since entering the room. "You all only have one planet; you must protect it. That now holds true for the Inhumans as well."

"Well," said Tony as he stood back up, unsure when he'd sat back down. "I need a drink. Anyone with me?" He looked around at them, ignoring Peter's hand hanging down from ceiling. "No takers? Great, more for me. This was fun."

"We're not finished here, Stark," called Fury after him as he watched the younger man leave.

"I'm finished. Here anyway. You're all welcome to follow me and keep talking," said Tony over his shoulder, only pausing for a moment in his stride before he swept out the door being closely followed by Peter. "Get off the ceiling, kid. Cool, but creepy."

"I'm not creepy," muttered Peter as he dropped to the floor on silent feet. "Rude."

Everyone watched Tony and his shadow leave before sighing and standing, knowing they had no choice but to follow him.

"Isn't it a little early for alcohol?" said Steve to no one in particular and not really expecting a reply.

"Stark's full of shit," declared Fury as he also stood and headed for the door. He pretended not to see the slight surprise on some of the faces he passed. "The brat hasn't had a drop of alcohol in over seven months. Pay attention, Rogers."

Sam looked at Scott then. "Told you he knows everything. It's not natural, man. Bet he knows what I had for breakfast this morning."

"Oatmeal, Wilson," came Fury's voice through the doorway, man unseen. "Carry your asses, people! My time isn't unlimited."

Sam's eyes widened as he looked to Steve in shock. Steve didn't have the heart to tell the other man that he had a stain on his shirt near his shoulder that was obviously from oatmeal. Natasha, Clint and Barnes didn't have the same issue, but they all just smirked and refrained as it didn't make what Sam said any less true. Fury was frightening when he wanted to be.

"Someone going to wake up the kid?" called out Clint as he headed for the door with everyone else. "I mean, how long is that trank supposed to last..."

Chapter End Notes

OmG! The posting is still not fixed!!! I can't do this.... OTL
I've checked 3 times before posting this (and removed 10 pages) so, if any of you notice any funny characters I missed please let me know. Knowing me, I have. :/
Alright, I'm BACK people. I just want to say thank you to everyone who has sent me messages and pokes to come back to this. After everything that was going on with me and then losing all of my chapters to this that hadn't been posted yet I'd really lost a lot of my motivation to finish this. I'm sorry to say it, but... yeah. That's the truth of it. But you guys gave me the push to give it one more go, so here I am. I reread it and I remember where I was going with this - and even better - form some new ideas to add to it. :) So this train is back on track and I'm no longer regretting all my life choices.

**Also, now that I've seen Thor; Ragnarok you should know that this story completely disregards everything that happened in that movie. Mainly because I started writing this before it came out, so didn't know what was going to happen in the movie and secondly, simply because I want too. :P The only thing that my story and that movie share is that Thor and the Hulk did meet up on that planet, but I had planned to leave the details of their time there very vague and, so far, have no plans to change that.

Chapter: XI

Tony watched from the corner of his eye as Kisa gracefully jumped up to sit on the counter to his right as he opened the cabinet above the coffee maker and reached up to retrieve his second favorite Iron Man coffee mug. He froze in confusion when his hand encountered nothing but air. Frowning, he focused all his attention on the shelf above and huffed audibly in growing disbelief when he didn't see the red and gold mug. He went up on his toes to see further back on the second shelf, just in case someone may have moved it, but was disappointed when he didn't see it there either.

"Neither of you have seen my Iron Man coffee cup have you?" he asked the other two with him, knowing it was an extreme long shot, but deeming the issue worth the try.

Peter exchanged a look with Kisa from his perch on one of the stools by the island counter before both of them shook their heads in the negative. There was a large Iron Man coffee mug in the workshop, but they assumed Tony wasn't asking them about that one. Not actually seeing them shake their head, but sensing them from the silence, Tony sighed and grabbed one of the large S.H.I.E.L.D mugs.

Someone had stolen and was now, probably, using his mug for their own nefarious plans. He would discover who it was soon, but for now he'd have to settle for inferior products. He didn't think any of the others would appreciate it if he interrupted the discussion they had going on in the sitting area behind him. He sat the cup down on the counter as he started the maker before turning around to lean back against the counter so he could easily see the other two as he spoke.
"You two don't want to join the others?" he asked, flicking his eyes towards the sitting area for a moment. Even with that short glance he could tell there was a lot of tension in the air around them. "I'm pretty sure they're back to talking about The Accords."

"That's one way of putting it," frowned Peter, who was still in his costume and had no trouble hearing the discussion going on behind him. "I'm good right here, thanks."

"It is not my concern," shrugged Kisa.

Tony eyed them both curiously for a moment, before shrugging. Who was he to tell them what they should or shouldn't do? Besides, it would be a bit hypocritical of him to do that when he wasn't going in there himself - not that he had a problem with being a little hypocrite in situations like these, but it wasn't any fun when the other party was aware.

"Anthony, don't you think you should join them?" asked Kisa.

He shrugged. "They don't need me."

"Umm, actually..." began Spider-Man. Tony could hear the worry in his voice that his mask was hiding.

Tony watched him, interestingly. "That bad?"

"Umm, a bit, yeah."

Tony looked over at Kisa, seeing her slight frown, then sighed in defeat. "Fine. I'm going," he said, straightening up. "But I'm taking my coffee and I feel the need to point out that I believe both of you overestimate my ability to mediate." And what the hell? Wasn't he usually the one who required mediating? Since when did he become the mediator?

Kisa watched him walk away, concerned, before she turned to look at Spider-Man. "You still paying attention, Peter?"

Peter's masked eyes widened comically in shock, even as he nodded in affirmation.

"Good," she nodded, hopping down from the counter. "He is their glue, though none of them realizes it. Not even Anthony. They will need him and each other to fix what has been broken."

He tilted his head at her then, curiously. He knew exactly what she was talking about and he hoped she was right. "Do you really believe it's possible?"

"Anything is possible, Peter, with time and a lot of effort," she assured, looking at him before they both turned to look in the direction the others were. "As long as they don't give up on each other." After a moment she turned her gaze to the young man. "There is someone I must speak to. I will return. Stay with him, Peter."

Peter gave her a questioning look, wondering what she thought he could do if a problem between the Avengers arose, but as he had no intentions of going any where soon, he just gave her a small nod before turning to follow the way Stark had gone. Focusing his attentions back on the other room where everyone else was he completely missed the woman behind him vanish into thin air.

**ooooo**

Tony stood a few feet in front of the entrance to the living room as he tried to gradually take in what was going on. Vision, he saw, was stood to his left and slightly behind him, motionless in
silent disapproval. Natasha was on his right, arms folded across her chest and face set in a stone mask. Tony couldn't tell what she was thinking, but he was willing to bet a lot of money it wasn't happy thoughts. Bruce was standing on her other side, looking calmer than anyone else in the room; which probably wasn't the best thing for his tower. Tony mentally noted to get the man some hot tea as soon as it was possible. Rhodey, he noticed, had taken a spot behind the both of them and from the frown on his face it wasn't hard to guess what he was thinking. From the way he was rubbing his hand up and down on his thigh, just above where his leg brace began, Tony was quite positive his best friend was imagining beating Steve - and possibly Clint, too - with his leg braces, which he really hoped he wouldn't do because it took Tony a good five hours to build (2 hours longer then the set before) those and they're his most recent and advanced set yet. He really liked this pair; the metal is lighter and easier for Rhodes to maneuver.

He noted Thor, Lang and Hill standing close to the large windows along the far-side of the room, all three of them watching the others in the room, but not contributing one way or the other; King T'Challa not too far from them. When Thor caught his gaze, he gave a slight nod in acknowledgement before returning his attention to the others.

Suddenly, Tony gave a slight flinched and tuned back into the conversation when he felt Natasha kick him in the ankle with the heel of her boot. He figured it was her way of telling him to pay attention because when he turned to look at her she didn't look back, just kept her gaze focused on Steve and the rest.

Steve stood on the other side of the large living room, windows and one couch behind him, with Clint and Sam at his sides. Clint was glowering just as much as Steve, while Sam seemed to be more thoughtful on the matter. Barnes sat on the sofa chair nearest to Sam, frowning hard and looking like he was thinking of murdering someone; which really didn't say much since Tony thought he looked as if he wanted to kill someone from the moment he arrived at the tower with the king.

Nick Fury and Phil Coulson was standing vertically between both parties, their backs to the open kitchen and breakfast bar; possibly so they could have an open view of everyone and their reactions, Tony figured since Phil was being pretty quiet so far. Observing.

"That's not what I'm saying; stop putting words in my mouth," stated Steve, frustration beginning to show in his voice. "I know protecting the innocent is our highest priority, but you can't believe that stopping the enemy isn't just as important. We cannot be expected to be able to neutralize the threat and save everyone. More often than not, we don't arrive on a scene until after the danger has already begun. We are not Gods, despite what some may believe and it is unrealistic to expect us to be able to save and protect every single person. That is what I'm saying. I'm not saying I'm okay with innocent people dying... I'm just saying that the reality is that someone will. And that is only one of my concerns."

"This was the worse time to quit drinking," sighed Tony as he shook his head, quickly figuring out what was going on. It was obviously a waste of his time to come join the rest as it appeared Steve was still harping on the same tired issues that had already been addressed in the revised Accords.

"Maybe," said Natasha calmly, giving a light shrug. She figured it was a moot point as they both knew there wasn't any alcohol in the tower; Tony just liked to needle her.

"I have much better things I could be doing right now," he declared before all eyes turned to him.

"Sorry we're boring you, Stark," said Clint with a roll of his eyes.

"Apology not accepted, because you are boring me, Barton," he said, meeting the archers gaze
"Excuse me?" frowned Steve, crossing his arms. What the hell was Tony on about now?

"I thought you read the revised Accords, Rogers," accused Fury, crossing his arms as he regarded the ex-superhero.

"I did," Steve agreed, turning his attention to the other man.

"Then you should be aware that we do not expect you or the Avengers to provide safety and protection during a hostile situation. The Accords state that a sufficient protection and safety detail must be provided in any and all hostile situations that The Avengers and any of its allies, including and not limited to The Fantastic Four and any other enhanced individuals, respond to that may result in deadly force that could potentially create a more dangerous environment for any person(s) where within', yes, I read it," finished Steve while Phil blinked at being cut off.

Everyone in the room who'd fully read the Accords exchanged uneasy looks as the air in the room seemed to shift in some way.

"Thank you," replied Phil, giving that grin of his when he is about to impart important information that he feels one should already be aware of. "Then you should already know that Clause A of that stipulation puts the specific responsibility of providing that safety and protection on S.H.I.E.L.D. or, more accurately, on the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. Currently Fury is the one responsible for taking that measure before calling in any Avenger or other. Not you."

Steve blinked. He didn't remember reading any clauses after that. He'd become so annoyed at reading that particular stipulation that he'd thrown the whole stack down on his coffee table and walked away from it. It was hours later when he'd returned to reading the packet and he'd moved on to the next stipulation, seeing no point in finishing whatever else was part of the previous one. His eyes flicked between Fury and Phil before turning to look at Sam.

"Is that true?" he asked his friend even though he could already see the answer in his eyes. He ignored the faint arch in Phil's brow at his question. Did he really expect Steve to just take his word for it now?

"Yeah Steve," sighed Sam, returning his look with one of his own. "It's true. Fury has to have a way to protect the people in place before he calls us in or he is not allowed to bring us or any enhanced individual in. They will be expected to handle the problem on their own and/or with the help of the local police."

Steve frowned then. That sounded like it could be a potential problem. And as an Avenger he wouldn't be able to do anything about it... well legally. "Okay, well that's one problem covered, sort of, but there's still th-"

"Why don't we just get to the real issue here?" cut in Tony, finally losing his patience with the entire thing. "Whatever other issues you have, Rogers, we both know that the real problem here is that you don't want to have to answer to anyone. You want to be able to go in, save the day, hopefully save more people than you lose and leave. Not have some agency tell you when and where you can help."

"Is that so bad?" asked Steve, turning to look at Tony. "Come on, Tony, you hated S.H.I.E.L.D. And now you're telling me you're really okay with them pulling your strings? Really? Who are we
"You're right," nodded Tony, noting from the corner of his eye Spider-Man perched on the ceiling to his left, "there was no love loss between S.H.I.E.L.D and me, but that had more to do with them being a government controlled agency than the agency itself. I still worked with them though, because despite them being the government they were the least annoying of the bunch -- and they weren't trying to force me to make weapons. That was a plus in my book," he shrugged. "Now, the new S.H.I.E.L.D, while being government sanctioned are not government owned. It is ran only by the Director and POTUS and their technology and weapons are all in-house and/or provided by SI. The WSC and the UN can make recommendations, but they do not control S.H.I.E.L.D or The Avengers. And as long as Patches is the one running things I think I can live with that."

"Oh really?" replied Steve in disbelief. "And looked what happened on his watch, Tony. HYDRA happened. HYDRA hiding inside S.H.I.E.L.D." Steve turned his gaze to Fury then, who returned his look with an arched brow of his own. "Don't get me wrong, I have great respect for you and what you did, but you dropped the ball," he shrugged, "and honestly The Avengers did fine those years without S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Bullshit, Rogers, you're not going to put that on me. I admit I didn't realize something was wrong until it was almost too late and that's on me, but I'm not the one who decided to take down S.H.I.E.L.D along with HYDRA. I'm not the one who decided it was a good idea to dump information on more than five hundred secret operatives on the internet, compromising them and putting their lives in danger," he said as he looked around and made sure to make eye contact with both Romanov and Hill.

"If you were so against it, Nick, than why didn't you stop me?"

"Because we both know you were going to do it any way, Rogers, no matter what I said," he replied and then cut his eyes to Barnes. "And I wasn't really in any condition to stop you, now was I?" After a moment he turned his gaze back to Steve. "Despite that though, what was left of S.H.I.E.L.D was still able to come and help in Sokovia. I wonder what you would have done if we hadn't shown up... I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be having this conversation right now, because of course, you were doing fine without us."

"That was one incident," began Steve, facing off with Fury. Everyone was so engrossed in the back and forth no one noticed as Wanda slowly entered the room, having heard the loud voices from down the hall when she'd finally woken up. "And it was not a normal case."

"When is anything The Avengers handle a 'normal case'? I didn't create this team to handle 'normal'. If you're being called in it's pretty much guaranteed that whatever is happening isn't normal," replied Fury with an arch of his brow.

"I see," said Tony, stepping forward. He watched as Steve and Clint exchanged questioning looks before aiming them at him. "You would rather take your chances with putting innocent lives in more danger than be held accountable when things go wrong - and something always goes wrong - by the government. This is the whole reason the Accords were made in the first place. The people are afraid and listening to you guys right now, I don't blame them. All of this isn't about the government, not really, this is about S.H.I.E.L.D."

Sam stiffened as he watched Stark. He had a sinking feeling he knew where this was going and he eyed Steve as he wondered if the blond knew it, too.

"What are you talking about, Tony?" asked Steve, irritated, "I have nothing personal against S.H.I.E.L.D." Sam sighed inwardly; well that answered that.
Steve was too busy staring at Tony to see Bucky freeze in his seat, see the slight change in his
demeanor, but Tony saw it and he figured so did Natasha as she, too, had stiffened in response.

"Really?" he asked, brow arched. Tony watched the confusion cross Steve's face and shook his
head. He didn't know anyone else who could lie to themselves so completely... or maybe it was
just an extreme case of denial. After all, it was Peggy they were talking about and with that
thought, Tony shook his head. "Forget it. I'm going back to my lab. Let me know when you all
are ready to talk honestly." Tony turned for the door, noting that Vision and Rhodey were ready to
follow him out. "And Brucie-bear, maybe you should get yourself a nice cup of chamomile, hm?"

"My control is better than that now, Tony," sighed Bruce as he looked at his friend.

Tony just returned the looked with one of his own.

"Okay, yeah maybe," he admitted after another moment. The Big Guy was more restless than
normal at the moment as he turned to look at the other occupants of the room. "Why do you all
like to agitate me?"

Steve eyed the doctor like everyone else as Bruce turned and headed for the kitchen, presumably to
make himself some tea, before he turned back to Tony, catching the engineer before he could leave
the room.

"So you're just going to walk away again?" he asked, tone accusatory. "All you've been doing since
we returned is hiding and running away."

He learned from the best, thought Tony as he turned back to face Steve; Vision and Rhodey doing
the same. He may not have said it aloud, but he knew his look spoke volumes as he saw the other
man slightly flinch.

"That may be, but I walk away so I don't say something I may later regret," he shrugged, trying to
make like the accusation didn't hit a spot. "Or I say something you're not ready to hear, especially
from me."

"Maybe," shrugged Steve. "Not your problem though. You've gone this far, if you have
something more to say, say it."

"Fine," he replied before he could stop himself. Tony frowned as he looked around at everyone,
his eyes meeting Barnes for a moment before he looked back at Steve. "You really wanna do this
now? Okay. You stand there, arms folded over your chest wearing your self-righteous attitude
like some kind of armor and you don't even realize how tarnished it is. You imply you would be
okay with someone you love dying due to war because that's what war is, that you could just take
that and accept it and move on, but you haven't. In the five or so years you've been awake you've
done nothing but wallow in guilt and pain over his death," he points a finger at Barnes as he
momentarily flicks his eyes apologetically in the other man's direction before continuing, not
missing the stiffening in Steve's shoulders. "Even after you knew he was alive and you still felt guilty
and hurt. You're doing it right now and you've been doing it since the Accords were presented to
you. Your feelings of guilt fueled everything you've done in regards to him since you found out he
was alive and what had been done to him. He's the sole reason you were bent on bringing down
S.H.I.E.L.D with HYDRA, because you blame them just as much as you blame HYDRA and
yourself for what was done to him. So don't you stand there and tell the rest of us that you would
be able to handle it, because you're not handling anything. Yet you don't understand why all those
people out there want some accountability and oversite on our parts?"

"That's different," swallowed Steve, taking a few steps forward and forcing himself to hold Tony's
"How Steve?" asked Tony, also stepping forward. "How is it different for you and not them? Because I have to tell you, from where I'm standing it looks remarkably the same."

"Then you need to check your eyes, Tony, because that isn't the same as what they are trying to do to us."

"You're a bigot, a hypocrite and a liar, Rogers," accused Tony directly in Steve's face, voice and eyes hard. "You refused to sign and were ready to fight the entire government and the UN because part of you holds them at least partially responsible for what happened to Barnes because they are the government just like S.H.I.E.L.D and S.H.I.E.L.D chose to deal with Zola, who was HYDRA, and HYDRA hurt Barnes. With you, it always comes back to Barnes and damn anyone who has to fall because of it." Tony stared up at him as he paused before continuing. "But let's not forget the biggest part; Peggy Carter."

"Shut up, Tony," gritted out Steve, hands fisting at his sides. "Leave her out of this."

"You think I like it any more than you do?" he asked, voice getting louder. "You need to face facts, Rogers, and stop trying to blame others. HYDRA infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D practically from the beginning, which means it was on her watch... and his. Not Fury."

"She was your aunt, Tony..." replied Steve with a hint of desperation as his eyes flicked between angry dark ones. "Don't you care-"

"AND HE WAS MY FATHER!" yelled Tony, heart racing and eyes watering. He hated him for making him do this. "And they fucked up. They played with the devil and the devil won. And people died." His mother died. "I know you love her, but that does not make her infallible. Peggy and Howard made a decision and it was the wrong one. You need to find a way to accept that."

"You'd love that wouldn't you, Tony?" breathed out Steve, blue eyes like steel. "For me to hate Peggy the way you hate Howard. Take the only thing I have left of her and taint it just like you tain-"

"Steve!" interrupted Bucky, trying to defuse the situation and stop Steve from saying something he couldn't take back. He exchanged a worried look with an equally worried Sam.

Steve's head turned to look down at Bucky then, completely missing the hurt look that crossed Tony's face before he took a few steps back and away from Steve. Seeing the look in Bucky's eyes, he took a moment to breathe and, realizing what he almost said, closed his eyes in self-disgust as his hands fell from their fisted positions. Steve took another moment, sending a look of gratitude to his friend, before he turned back to Tony. He didn't miss the accusatory looks aimed his way from multiple directions nor the space Tony had put between them. He couldn't believe what he'd almost said to Tony... and in front of everyone.

"I'm sorry, Tony," he said, reaching out a hand, but quickly let it drop when Tony flinched away from him. "You have to know I didn't mean that. I was just angry, but I had no right to take it out on you."

"It's fine, Rogers," he replied, looking away from Steve, his gaze falling on and connecting with the Wakandan king. Tony's nightmares were often full of Pepper falling; he would never forgive himself for almost getting her killed and he thanks God - a God he's not even positive he believes in - every day that she didn't die that day. "I think we're finished here now. Either way, I know I am."
"Tony..."

Tony took another step back, this time towards the door before he turned to regard Steve once more. He'd gotten himself under control enough that there were no more tears threatening to fall in front of everyone.

"You should know," began Tony as he looked around him at the ones who had followed and supported Steve before turning back to him. "Zemo wasn't HYDRA, he didn't frame Barnes for any great purpose. It was just plain, old revenge. His family died in Sokovia and he felt that all of us should have to answer for that. One guess, where he got his information on the Winter Soldier from." He watched as realization dawned in a pair of bright blue eyes. "Guess you didn't think about what all could possibly be in those files when you decided to do a complete info dump on the internet - and I know it was your idea, that had Steve Rogers written all over it; no way the pirate or Nat would have thought to go that route. Why they agreed to go along with it... well, it's no matter now. It was just a domino affect after that. I talked to him, did you know? He didn't even want us dead, just wanted to break us the same way he had been broken. And he knew right where to hit to get the job done. He was just a man who lost everything and wanted those he deemed responsible to pay... but imagine if he were someone else stronger or with more power..." he shook his head. "That's just one reason why accountability is necessary."

Tony looked around at everyone then. "We are not perfect. We will make mistakes and more often than not, those we protect will be the ones to pay the price. We choose to fight. We choose so they don't have to and the world is saved..."

"But not for us," said Natasha, her eyes meeting Tony's as he turned to look at her. For the first time she was truly beginning to understand just how apart from the rest of the world she was. That they all were. She may not have made the choice to be what she is, but she did choose to stay in that world and do something good with what had been forced on her. That was her choice.

"No, not for us," he agreed, thinking of Pepper and the few girlfriends before her that he had to leave because of Iron Man. He turned back to Steve then. "Them out there, they pay the heavier price. They deserve to demand more from us. You should understand that more than most."

The room grew quiet then as everyone exchanged heavy looks, but no one was willing to be the first to break the silence. No one knew what to say anyway. Tony was the last one they expected to see that kind of compassion from. At least not from the Tony Stark that most of them thought they knew.

"Well, I have things I need to take care of," said Tony, taking a sip from his now cold coffee. "I'll leave the rest of this to you guys. Barnes, come find me when you're ready to get started. FRIDAY can tell you where to find me if I'm not busy." Tony turned to leave then, ignoring all eyes watching him.

At the door he turned back, couldn't help adding one last parting shot. "You know, I found it funny that even though you were Captain America with that whole honest and true reputation, that Zemo not only assumed you knew what happened to my parents, but that you also hadn't told me. This all probably would have gone down differently if he'd been wrong about either one of those two points. Or both."

Steve met his gaze, feeling guilty at the look of hurt and betrayal on his face, but being unable to adequately dispute that fact, he, for once, chose to remain silent and watched as Tony finally walked away. Vision and Rhodey following.

"You know, Cap, you're not the only one who made bad choices in all of this," spoke up Peter from
the ceiling. "And you're not the only one that was hurt. But at least he's trying. Can any of you say the same? It's not hard to come back when the welcome mat has been rolled out for you."

After a moment he silently flipped to the floor and walked out. No doubt, going to find Tony.

"He is right."

Everyone turned to the direction of the voice. Wanda stared back at them all from the corner.

"Ms. Maximoff," acknowledged Fury, watching her. "Nice of you to join us. I take it we understand each other?"

Wanda blinked at the dangerous man, but nodded with her head held high.

Fury watched her for a moment longer before nodding back. "Good. Now you were saying?"

"Tony Stark," she replied, looking at them all. "He is right. I chose to be what I am and maybe my reasons are not what I thought, but it does not change that I freely made the choice. The former, I must find a way to come to terms with, but the latter I have already accepted. I do not know if I can change my way of thinking after believing one thing for so long, but I am willing to try."

Wanda looked around her then until she found the one she was looking for. She turned to face the Wakandan king. "I am sorry for your scientists and I am sorry I did not think to say so before now. I owe it to them to at least learn to better control my powers."

"Thank you for saying so," spoke T'Challa with a slight bow. "Apology accepted. I wish you luck, Ms. Maximoff and may the great Panther God watch over you in your quest. May I make a suggestion?"

She nodded. "Please."

"Talk to Tony," he said, small smile on his face. "I would be surprised if he has not already thought of something to aide you in your endeavours."

She stared at him for a silent moment before giving another nod. This one not as enthusiastic as before.

"This is The Avengers?" asked Bucky quietly as he turned judging eyes on both Steve and Sam. He remembered the kid from before and even he could tell that she had just done something to be proud of.

"No, not this..." sighed Steve in reply. He was finally starting to see that there were more cracks in their foundation than he initially believed. He couldn't help wondering how he'd let it get this far as it was obvious that the problems began while he was leader of The Avengers. How did he not see it? Things were going to be different this time around. He turned to Fury then "Okay Nick," he said, looking the other man in the eye. "I'll sign. I can go on a little faith here if you can."

Nick considered him for a moment, giving away nothing before exchanging a look with Phil that only he could decipher. "Alright, Rogers. Let's finish this then. I don't believe we have a lot of time to waste."
"And you are sure this will work?"

"I have no reason to think otherwise," Stephen replied as he eyed the other sorcerer. "Why? Do you?"

"Hmm. Well, let's just say Karnilla is not known for her generosity," replied Loki with a barely there smirk.

Stephen arched a brow then, "Neither are you."

"Touché," agreed Loki, this time his smirk was in full force. Once again, he couldn't help wondering just how this human walked into the Norn Queen's palace and came out without any harm to speak of. If his story was to be believed, that is, and unfortunately Loki could not detect any sense of deceit from the other man. Perhaps the human was much stronger than he first thought. "I suppose it's of no matter now. The deed is already done as they say. Now we wait and see."

"Indeed," agreed Stephen as they both returned their gazes to the man lying in the bed between them. As he watched and waited for the slumbering king to awaken he wondered how much more time it would take. It had already been twenty minutes since he'd returned and provided the antidote. He'd assumed it would not take very long, but he had no definite answer to give for he'd not asked. But something inside him was telling him it would not be much longer. "Perhaps you will do better knowing it did not come without it's price."

"That does provide some relief, I will admit," said Loki, not taking his gaze off the only father he'd ever known. "If you don't mind my asking, what grandiose price did the queen require?"

Stephen frowned inwardly, still not particularly liking what was asked of him, but apparently he had remained quiet for too long because now Loki had his gaze back on him. He fought not to roll his eyes as he replied, "A favor."

Now it seemed it was Loki's turn to arch a brow, slowly. "...I beg your pardon?"

Stephen did roll his eyes then. Seriously, it was not that surprising. "Am I speaking a foreign language? Shall I? A favor. The woman extracted a promise of a favor from me. One of her choosing and when she chooses."

Loki stared for a moment longer before turning his gaze away. The possibilities that such a promise held... well, he didn't quite know as he had no idea just what the human was capable of. But it would seem that perhaps Karnilla did. "You must be a much more formidable sorcerer than I have given you credit for, Doctor. No offense."

"None taken," replied Stephen with a glance and a shrug. "I have no idea how formidable you credit me to be then or now. What I am is quite certain that whatever you believe will be wrong."

They held each other's gaze then, neither willing to be the first to look away and concede the point to the other - and both stubborn enough to make the stalemate last.

"He is Sorcerer Supreme. There is no magician stronger than he to be found on Midgard," spoke up a tired voice from between them causing both men to immediately look down. "But there is still room for improvement."

"Your majesty," greeted Strange with a slight bow. He could give respect where it was deserved. "I am glad to see you awake. Time for sleep is over, you are needed."
"Yes..." agreed Odin, his vision far away. "I have seen much while I slept. My dreams show many a great things. Some shall come to pass, some shall not," he sighed and for a moment his face showed a great sadness. "The battle for Midgard and the Infinity Stones is upon us as once foretold. None in the Nine Realms shall go untouched." His eye focused on Stephen then. "Sorcerer, where is my son? Where is Thor?"

"Father," called Loki, taking a step closer to the bed and the king lying there.

Stephen looked between the two men, father and son, curiously.

Odin tilted his head to look at him then. "Loki," acknowledged the king as he took in his youngest son. The guilt coming off the dark haired man was nearly tangible it was so strong. "What have you done and where is your brother? Tell me."

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Pepper pressed her fingers to her temples in an effort to stave off the pain that was steadily growing behind her eyes. There was so much to do, it seemed, and not nearly enough time in the day to get it all done. She still had to finalize the look of the invitations for the Maria Stark Foundation Ball, send it to print and get them mailed out when the date of the Ball was less than a month a way; go over Tony's calendar for the month and knock off any meetings scheduled for him that he didn't absolutely have to attend; reschedule the upcoming meeting with the Board of Directors; pack for her trip to Japan that she was leaving for in less than 48 hours; follow-up with Tony about the issue with manufacturing SI's latest design in cell phones; and shop for a birthday gift for her twin niece and nephew out in California and mail them off before the end of next week. And those were only the immediate tasks she needed to handle.

She would love to pass some of it off onto Tony, but she knew he was already dealing with a full plate of his own - that was getting fuller every day. She wished she could help him, but she knew she'd relinquished her rights to be by his side with everything when she broke things off with him. And despite wanting to still be able to support him, she didn't regret her decision to break off their personal relationship. Tony needed someone he could lean on, someone stronger than himself. He needed someone who could not only recognize when he was burning himself out, but also have the balls to shut him down when needed. While the former was easy, Pepper could never really get the hang of the latter. She could stop Tony sometimes, but ultimately Tony Stark did what Tony Stark wanted. And she was sure that it didn't help their relationship that even though she was CEO of SI she still, technically, worked for Tony.

With their personalities, it was a recipe for disaster. One that very nearly happened.

Pepper knew herself well and she knew she was not cut out to be the known girlfriend or lover of Tony Stark and Iron Man. She could be his friend though... if he would let her. But she knew she'd hurt Tony when she'd broke up with him and brought all his issues with abandonment to the forefront. Pepper knew when she'd made the decision that it was going to change their relationship - probably forever. But she had hope that soon they would find a way back to the closeness they once had before they let romance and regular sex muddy the waters.

So with all that, why was she contemplating a relationship with one James Rhodes, a.k.a War Machine? She had no earthly clue. The man could be as bad as Tony when he wanted to be.
Suddenly a beeping on her desk called her attention, interrupting her thoughts. Pepper sighed at the blinking call light on her phone before hitting the answer button. She hoped her exasperation didn't show in her voice. "What is it, Linda?"

"My apologies, Ms. Potts," came her assistant's soft voice, "I know you requested no interruptions, but there is a gentlemen here demanding to see you. He said he came to see Mr. Stark, but was informed by security that he was not available."

"Who is he, Linda? Did he have an appointment with Mr. Stark?" Pepper asked though she already knew the answer to one of those questions. She was the one who handled Tony's calendar when it came to SI business, after all. And FRIDAY did for everything else.

"He says his name is Tiberius Stone and that he is an old friend of Mr. Stark. He did not have an appointment."

Pepper frowned. The name sounded familiar, but she couldn't exactly put her finger on why. "Send him in, Linda. I'll give him five minutes. Also, do you have that package ready I asked you for for my meeting with Martin?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'll bring it right in." replied Linda before hanging up.

A moment later her office door opened as Linda strolled in, a tall, dark haired man following behind her.

"Here's that package you requested, Ms. Potts," said Linda with a small smile as she walked up and handed a rather thick file across the desk to her. "Also, Accounting called and said Mr. Steinberge was ready for you whenever you were."

"Of course he did," breathed Pepper as she took the file and placed it to the side, noting Linda's knowing grin. Martin Steinberge was an arrogant, insufferable prick at the best of times, but as long as he remained as good with numbers as he has been for the past five years, Pepper had no problems putting the little pain in her neck in his place when she needed. If telling himself things were done on his terms helped the man get up in the morning who was she to take that from him? "And I will meet with him at the time I said I would and not a moment before. Thank you, Linda, I do appreciate it. Hold all my calls for now, would you?"

"Yes, ma'am and you're very welcome," she replied as she turned to leave the office and return to her own desk outside.

"Linda, could you also contact Marla in Advertising and find out where are the final designs for the invitations for the MSF Ball? They should have been on my desk yesterday..."

"Right away, ma'am," answered Linda from the doorway where she paused when her name was called.

"Thank you," smiled Pepper. She watched as the brunette left and closed the door behind her before she turned her attention to the silent man standing before her. It only took her ten seconds to assess and decide she wasn't a fan. He was good looking enough with his dark hair and blue eyes and tall frame, but he carried an air about him as if the world owed him and she didn't have time for that kind of nonsense. "Mr. Stone," she smiled up at him, giving him the smile she gave the press and paparazzi, "you don't mind if we skip the pleasantries? Good. I have a meeting due to start in twenty minutes that I must prepare for, so you have five. How can I help you?"

Tiberius Stone smiled at the beautiful strawberry blonde before him, but recognized right away that
it wasn't going to do him any good to try to charm her. She was obviously too busy to fully appreciate his efforts. "I understand Ms. Potts. I am actually here to see Tony, if possible. I was told he was unavailable, but I'm sure if someone was to let him know I'm here he'd be more than willing to see me."

Pepper arched a brow at that, but didn't comment. Obviously his arrogance was on a completely different level. "I see. And did you have an appointment? Mr. Stark is not in the habit of blowing off appointments he makes himself," subtly letting him know that she had no knowledge of any appointment if there were one, "and definitely not without letting the party know something else has come up. Was he aware you were coming?"

He gave her a winning smile that seemed to have absolutely no effect on his eyes. "As I said, if you could just inform him that I'm here I'm sure he would like to see me."

"Well, be that as it may, it would seem you made this trip for nothing. Mr. Stark is currently not in the office," she said looking him square in the eyes. "I would suggest contacting him to set up an appointment or you're welcome to try just showing up again another day, but I caution you that Mr. Stark's time is usually spoken for when he's in office."

"Can you not just call him for me now?" he said, frustration beginning to show in his voice. "I was under the impression that he also lived somewhere in this Tower as well."

"Didn't you tell Linda you are an old friend of Mr. Stark's?" she gave him a polite smile, not really waiting for a reply. "Then I'm sure you are capable of contacting him on your own. Despite popular opinion, Mr. Stone, I am not Mr. Stark's secretary. If you wish to contact him for personal reasons you are going to have to do that yourself. If you are old friends like you stated that shouldn't be a problem for you."

A muscle ticked in his jaw as he tried not to frown as Pepper watched him, expectantly. "Of course," he nodded, "could you provide me with a number I can reach him at?"

Pepper arched a brow then. Now, she was certain this man was also a liar. "Good day, Mr. Stone. I'll let Mr. Stark know you stopped by when he returns."

His face hardened then and he was unable to hide his anger. "And when will that be? His returning to his office."

"Once again, good day, Mr. Stone," replied Pepper, dropping all pretenses at being pleasant.

Tiberius Stone stood there for a moment, trying to stare her down, but eventually straightened his already straight suit jacket before giving her a slight nod. "Thank you, Ms. Potts," then turned and quickly left the office, leaving her door wide open.

Pepper watched the unpleasant man sweep past Linda without a word spoken to the brunette and out of the office heading for the elevator. She took another breath before shutting down her computer and gathering the file Linda had given her. Making sure she had everything she needed, Pepper quickly exited her office, stopping by Linda's desk first.

"Linda, call down to Security and let them know Mr. Stone is not to be allowed back in the Tower or any other SI properties without mine or Mr. Stark's permission, please. I'm heading down to my meeting with Martin. Text me if anything comes up."

"Yes, ma'am," nodded Linda. "Was it that bad?"

Pepper frowned then and shook her head, "Worse." Both women shared a commiserating look.
before Pepper turned and headed for the elevator. She'd find out from Tony later just who in the hell that man was, but right now she had another arrogant jerk to deal with -- but, at least Martin had the decency to be amusing while being annoying.

~TA~T
owed a debt, getting the man's attention. "I owe you a debt of gratitude. Thor tells me it is also thanks to you that I am awake. What would you ask of me?"

Tony smiled at the king, ready to accept thanks graciously, before realizing the king was serious and was honestly waiting for Tony to ask for something in return. Tony blinked and tried not to shift uneasily. "That's not necessary, your majesty," he waved a hand dismissively. "What are friends for?"

"And is that what we are, Anthony Stark? Friends?"

Tony straightened then. His eyes shifted around to the others and he noticed the quiet in the room behind him as he returned his attention to the king currently watching him in return. He couldn't help noting the fact that two of the most powerful men he now knew both wore an eye patch. "Thor is my friend, your majesty. He came to me for help and I gave it. I don't need nor require anything else," he replied, his smile completely gone. Suddenly remembering his manners he quickly added, "But thank you for the offer."

Odin watched him in silence, a thoughtful look on his ancient face. He'd never met such a human before. There was honesty in his words yet his face hid so much more. "You are an interesting human, Anthony Stark. And you are a Ward, I see. This is turning out to be a day of many firsts for me. Where is your Guardian?"

Tony blinked, not expecting to be asked that. He opened his mouth to reply only to shut it a moment later when he realized he had no idea where Kisa was. "That's a good question," muttered Tony as he turned to look in the direction of the kitchen as if she would still be sitting where he'd left her more than an hour ago.

"I am here, Odin-King."

Tony and everyone turned to look in the direction the voice had come from. All eyes locking on Kisa though she kept her gaze firmly on the king as she moved towards him. Tony didn't miss the slight widening of Loki's eyes as they filled with surprised realization.

Kisa stopped a few steps away from their group and respectfully bowed her head. "It is good to see you on your feet once more, your majesty. My name is Kisa."

Odin returned the bow with a nod. "Lady Kisa," he greeted as he assessed her. "A Devine Guard, you are young yet powerful. A credit to your race. You have done well, my lady." He looked back at Stark then. "Someone has chosen well for you, Anthony Stark, and must care for you a great deal. A Guard with her power is not often given to one Ward or so I have heard. Be it by your life or death you will leave a mark on this world. What kind of mark you must decide for yourself." He tilted his head as he continued to watch the same pair of dark amber eyes he'd seen many times in his dreams. In truth, he'd seen every one of the midgardians in his dreams. "Your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness; your conviction. There is nothing you would not do or give as long as you believe it possible and worth the price. While this can be a good thing you must also learn when it is better for you to let go. Knowing so will be the difference between your salvation and your downfall."

Tony swallowed as he stared back at the king. He wasn't sure what all of that meant, but he figured he had time left to figure it out. "Thank you."

Odin nodded at him. Anthony Stark had a difficult path ahead of him... but luckily, he was surrounded by many who were more than willing to help him. His son included. "Now, I must be returning to Asgard. It would appear that I have been gone for quite some time," he said, giving
his dark haired son beside him a significant look. "I was only waiting for your arrival. Thor was adamant that I meet you first."

Tony grinned as he looked at the big blond beside him. "I'm glad you did, your majesty. I wanted to meet you as well."

Odin nodded once more as he headed across the room for the door to the patio/launch pad. "Thor, Loki, let us go. I must find out what else has changed in my absence."

"Wait, what?" began Tony, following behind them with everyone else following behind him. "Thor, you're leaving?"

Thor turned to look at his friends as he followed his father and brother outside. "Only for the moment, friend Tony. I would not leave you all to handle what is coming alone. I shall return in three days time."

Tony nodded, relieved. He was certain they needed Thor here.

"Heimdall!" called out Odin, suddenly.

Everyone flinched when a moment later the bridge opened, slamming into the ground of the launch pad with a loud smack and standing before them was a large, muscular, black man, as large as Thor, with eyes as gold as the armor he wore and carrying a very large sword.

Tony blinked before exchanging a knowing look with Natasha. Wow. Break him off a piece of that chocolate... Umm, bad thoughts.

"My king," said Heimdall with a bow towards Odin. He turned to look at both Loki and Thor. "My prince, you did not tell me one of your human friends is a Ward."

"Heimdall," greeted Thor with a grin. "I did not discover it until recently, but do not pretend you did not know already."

Heimdall smiled but neither confirmed nor denied the claim.

"Everyone, this is Heimdall. He guards the way into Asgard and is one of my oldest friends," introduced Thor before he turned to look at the group of them.

"You're the one who sees everything," said Natasha as she watched the man in question.

"And more, my lady," replied Heimdall with a nod before turning to look at the royal family. "Is everyone ready? It is not wise to leave the bridge open for too long."

"Just a moment, Heimdall," answered Odin before he turned to look at the group from Midgard. "Anthony Stark. Gather the stones and keep them safe. Trust your instinct and you will know what to do. The battle for Midgard comes regardless, all has been set in motion. Find the one who is forgotten."

Tony frowned as he looked around him. Why was he being the one singled out here and what did that forgotten stuff mean? Turning back to the king he gave an uneasy nod, not wanting to ask any question as he had a suspicion the king was not going to tell him any more than that. "Alright."

"As gratitude for what you have done for me and since you have asked for nothing in return, I give you this, Anthony, son of Stark; as long as I or one of mine sits on the throne you and yours shall always be welcome in Asgard. This I decree as Odin-King."
Everyone exchanged shocked looks as Thor grinned at them and Odin moved back to stand with his sons and Heimdall.

"Heimdall," he nodded towards the bridge keeper before turning back to the others, all of them still sporting looks of shock. "Until our next visit, here or on Asgard."

Then, with a resounding crack, the bridge and its four occupants were gone, leaving nothing but a large scorch mark in their wake.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Hours later, Tony could be found in his worklab. As he added the finishing touches to the programming for the new Starkphone in the works, his mind drifted to everything that had happened earlier. He knew he needed to work on the algorithm for finding the rest of the Infinity Stone, but he figured it could at least wait until the morning. He was sure they all needed some time to process what had happened and what was inevitably coming. Hill had told him that everyone had not only decided to sign the Accords that day, but had also already done it. Officially The Avengers was an operating team again.

Officially.

It would have to do for now, because none of them were in the mood to make any more tries to fix their issues. He'd heard from Natasha that Barnes had decided to move into the guestroom on Steve's floor, leaving Lang to move into the guestroom on Wilson's floor. T'Challa stopped by to say goodbye on his way out, but promised he'd be back in a few days. He had no idea where Kisa nor Vision had disappeared to, Rhodey was having a nap and Peter had retreated to his room in the penthouse. He guessed Natasha was probably holed up with Bruce somewhere and was unsure about everyone else. He knew he could just ask Fry, but it wasn't really all that important. Everyone had retreated to their own corners and tomorrow was soon enough for anything more.

He was happy that Thor's father was awake and away from Midgard as he'd touch base with Pepper and she'd told him about his unexpected visitor today. He wasn't sure if Stone had come knowing Tony was the one who stole his special patient or for another reason, but he figured he'd ignore the man until he forced the issue. He knew it was only a matter of time before he would find a way to corner Tony, probably showing up at some place he figured Tony couldn't easily ditch him. He'd deal with it when he had too. Other than that, he didn't really want to think about Stone, because thinking of him brought up King Odin and he didn't want to go there. There was just too much there for him to even begin to process and he just wanted a moment of blessed quiet. No complications, no worries of battles, no nothing. Just engineering and his bots.

He wondered how long Fury was going to put off asking Pepper if she would help with his safety plan using Rescue.

Fury had yet to say anything to him, but he knew the other man was thinking it. If he was a better man he'd put the question to Pepper himself, give them both a heads up, but Tony was not a better man and he only wished he could be a fly on the wall when that conversation happened. Pepper could be a terrifying woman when she wanted and could and had made many a man larger than her cry. But Nick Fury wasn't a man who scared easily and Tony had no doubt he'd ask the redhead himself. He wouldn't like doing it - Pepper wasn't a predictable woman (not even Tony could say with a hundred percent accuracy what her answer would be) and anyone with half a brain knew that
Nick Fury preferred going into situations with at least half the questions already answered, but he would do it. And if Pepper said no Tony had no doubt the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D had at least three more candidates waiting in line.

No. Tony wasn't worried about that conversation at all. He did have more than half a mind to pull the surveillance footage in Pep's office though, if it happened there, but he wasn't worried. No, that wasn't what had his mind in such an uproar that he could barely concentrate on what he was doing. No, what he couldn't seem to get out of his head or make any sense of was the fact that apparently Nicholas J. Fury was also...

Nicholas J. Fury was also... ..... ..... best friends with Maria Stark.

_Nicholas J. Fury_ was best friends with _Maria Collins Carbonell Stark._

His _mom_ was best friends with Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D

It didn't make any sense. No matter how many different ways he said it, it just wasn't making any sense to him. How did that even happen? How did _the_ ultimate spy become best friends with Maria Stark? Yet Tony was positive he knew what he'd heard. At first, for a while, he tried to tell himself he'd heard wrong, that the name Fury had said was _Howard_ not Maria, because that would make sense, that had all the possibilities, but that wasn't who Fury said. His brain just refused to let that stick. Tony knew what he'd heard. Fury had called Maria Stark 'a very good friend'. He'd been sitting right beside the man, he'd heard him clearly and he'd seen his face and eye. Fury was perfectly serious. Deadly so. There was no denying the man was more than ready to put a bullet in Barnes for what had been done to Maria Stark.

There was no mathematical equation he knew of that could make any of this make sense to him. Because it didn't have any sense to it. Maria Stark and Nick Fury should _not_ have been friends. Acquaintances maybe, but not _friends._ Not friends, like how he and Rhodey were friends, or how Natasha and Barton were friends, or, hell, how Damon and Pythias were friends. His mom and Nick Fury should not be on such a list together.

Maria Stark, a woman who rubbed elbows on a daily with the rich, spoiled and entitled, who wore designer clothing just to go jogging (not that she ever jogged; of course not, she had a personal trainer who came to her) and set fashion trends for the famous and stupid, who ran and funded multiple charities, and who had her hair done every Saturday (because dark hair made her and her husband look like siblings) did not make friends with men like Nick Fury. Now, don't get him wrong, his mom was _awesome_ and Tony had no doubt that she could have done anything she set her mind to and that included making friends with spies.

The question was why would she want too? He could see how such a friend could be beneficial, but Maria Stark did not worry about those kinds of things.

Growing up, Tony could count on one had with fingers to spare how many of Howard's business associates were allowed in the mansion if there wasn't some sort of party happening. Other than Stane, who was almost a permanent fixture in his home growing up, there were only two others. Aunt Peggy and Uncle Nicky, who was Peggy's older brother (speaking of, he hadn't seen or spoken to Uncle Nick and Aunt Renée in a couple years - he made a mental note to call them), were the only other ones Tony could recall seeing on a regular basis. It wasn't until he was near six years old before he realized both of them even worked with Howard and Stane; he was nine before he realized they didn't work at SI though. And it was many years after that before he knew anything about S.H.I.E.L.D or Howard's role in it's creation. Howard was very careful to never bring any part of S.H.I.E.L.D anywhere around his wife and son. So how did his mom meet and become close friends with Nick Fury? And did Howard know?
He had a lot of questions and no answers. And he really wanted answers. Nick had disappeared before he could corner the man and Hill, when he'd asked her, had no answers to give; Maria Stark died long before she'd started working with Fury. He'd tried calling Fury, but the man was dodging his phone calls and not replying to any of his texts - which lead him to believe that the other man knew exactly why Tony was trying to reach him and didn't want to talk.

But Tony really wanted to know. He needed to know. This was his mother, it was not negotiable.

"FRIDAY," he called out, flipping his lucky screwdriver between his fingers. He didn't like what he was about to do, but he was determined and if Fury didn't want to talk... Well. "Get me everything you can find on Nicholas J. Fury and Maria Collins Carbonell Stark. And I mean everything. I don't care what avenues you take. Use the secure servers - after all, this is Fury and we're not out to make trouble - but find me what you can."

"Yes, boss," replied FRIDAY. He could hear a tone in her voice that he was certain sounded a bit like disapproval, but he ignored it. He had a right to know.

"Would it not be easier to just ask him?"

Tony jumped and nearly fell off his seat at the unexpected voice as he turned accusing eyes on the guardian.

"Of course it would," he replied after he got himself back situated. That was if the man in question even bothered to tell him the truth and let's face it, Nick Fury was the one man that could lie to Tony successfully. Which was why he had a personal rule to take certain things the man said with a grain of salt.

Kisa arched a brow at him when he didn't continue.

Tony sighed then and answered, "I tried. He's not answering my calls or texts."

"Maybe he needs time?"

"He's known me for years," he said, rolling his eyes and not missing the arched look she sent him, "he's had plenty of time to tell me this. I didn't even know he knew my mother now I'm finding out they didn't just know each other they were best friends. I want to know how that was."

"I understand," she nodded. "I still do not think this is the best way to go about getting those answers."

Tony looked at her then. Really looked at her. There was something in her voice... He turned fully towards her then, eyes suspicious.

"You know don't you?" he accused, watching her closely, "You know how he knows my mother."

Kisa looked back at him, silently, face thoughtful.

"No," she shook her head, deciding to tell him what little she knew. "That happened long before I came along. I do know he has been in your life your entire life and there is nothing he wouldn't do to keep you safe, Anthony. He gave his word that he would do so after all."

"What?"

"Just think about it, Anthony. I'm sure you will figure some of it out on your own," she replied. "Look to your memories and remember. Don't just use your mind and your eyes, for they can both
be deceived. Use your heart as well, Anthony," she reached out a gentle hand and placed it over his beating heart, "for the heart can never truly be tricked."

They stared at one another then as he placed his much larger hand over top hers' on his chest. She was trying to tell him something, he knew, and it was more than the fact that Maria Stark had met Fury long before Tony was even born, but he wasn't sure what it was. Whatever it was it was locked in the memories of his childhood.

"Ah, not to interrupt... but is this a bad time?"

Tony quietly released her hand and let it fall as the moment was broken. They both, simultaneously, turned their head's to look towards the new voice. Tony frowned as Kisa blinked, both taking in the unwelcome interruption.

James Buchannan "Bucky" Barnes stood in his lab doorway, looking slightly nervous and watching them both.
Chapter XII

Chapter Notes

Okay, I'm a little nervous about this one... so go ahead, be brutal. And everyone should know this story is not going to go like Avengers: Infinity War. I've already had too many things going differently and I don't want to change it. So... yep. I do find it kind of interesting that the movie did a couple things that I have planned though. Sort of. Anyway, let me stop procrastinating.

Chapter XII:

They were in a stalemate as they both stared at him and he could do nothing but return their stare. Bucky frowned as his eyes shifted back and forth between the two, certain he'd interrupted something. He wondered if he should just turn around and leave and come back at another time… but when? Stark had told him to come find him when he was ready to start and that was what he did. The woman – Friday? – didn’t tell him that Stark was busy when he’d asked. She’d only directed him to where he could find the other man, so how was he to know?

Maybe he should have let Steve come with him after all… or Wilson.

Then again. Bucky really didn’t believe allowing Steve to come would have gone over very well. He wasn’t scared of Stark, but he saw no reason to provoke him either and it didn’t take a genius to see that there was still a lot of anger and tension between Stark and Steve.

And he was really going to have to sit Steve down and find out what the hell was going on… he was just hoping that Wilson would beat him to it so he wouldn’t have to. He didn’t remember much about himself, but he didn’t feel like he was the touchy-feely type. Bucky just really couldn’t see himself sitting Steve down and talking about his feelings for Stark… that was Wilson’s job. And he would gladly like to leave it to him.

But after earlier, it was obvious something needed to be done. There was no denying there was more between Steve and Stark then he’d once thought. He’d thought Stark was just some rich, entitled know-it-all, that Steve worked with, but didn’t really get along with, but after what he’d seen earlier and then his short talk with Steve later before searching Stark out, he was sure that his first impression of the billionaire engineer wasn’t quite right.

"…so which one of you want to tell me what the hell all that was? The big blonde is really a Norse God? I may not remember my past, but I’m not an idiot. I recognize the names Odin and Thor just as well as the next nerd," he added as both Steve and Wilson gave him skeptical looks.

Steve and Sam exchanged identical looks before they, simultaneously, looked back at him with questioning looks.

“I’m just sayin’,” shrugged Bucky at their slightly surprised faces, “if you guys had Gods on your side, why the hell were you letting HYDRA kick your asses so much?”
“Hey!” exclaimed Sam while Steve rolled his eyes.

“HYDRA didn’t kick our asses,” sighed Steve as he crossed his arms. Bucky arched a brow, but said nothing, believing his look said it all. And it did. “They didn’t,” reiterated Steve. “And they’re not gods, they’re aliens. Though I think they’re who the myths were based off of... and wow, that sounded less weird in my head.”

“Aliens?” repeated Bucky in disbelief.

Steve nodded then shrugged. “You’ll get used to it. Trust me; it happens more often than you think.”

Bucky blinked then looked at Wilson for confirmation. “Is he serious?”

“Yeah,” he replied with a shrug of his own. “Can’t say I’ve seen any more aliens than you, but I did see some of the footage of what happened to New York.”

“Right,” said Bucky, eyes flicking between the two. “We’ll... talk more about that later, right now I need to go find Stark while I’m still in a mind to do this.”

“Are you sure about this, Buck?”

“No,” he answered, honestly, with a neutral look on his face. Mask firmly in place. “There are no other options though.”

“You want me to come with you?”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Steve,” he replied with a glare.

“I know you don’t,” huffed Steve. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just... this is Tony. And you.”

“I think we’ll be fine,” said Bucky, watching him closely. He wondered which one of them was Steve worried about. “And even if we’re not I don’t think you being there is going to make it better.”

Steve frowned, but didn’t argue the point. It was the truth after all.

“I can go if you want,” spoke up, Sam, reluctantly. He really didn’t want too, but he felt like he should at least offer anyway. He was, of course, banking on Barnes saying no.

And he wasn’t disappointed.

“No, again, I don’t need a babysitter,” said Bucky, now glaring at Wilson. In truth, he just didn’t want an audience for whatever was going to happen when he found Stark. “Just tell me where to go.”

Steve gave him an arched look, but complied. “You can take the elevator or the stairs down,” he said as he pointed out the door to the stairwell. “Ask FRIDAY to direct you. She’ll also let you know if Tony is busy or not. There’s no telling when he’s in his shop.”

Bucky nodded then turned and headed for the elevator. He had no idea who Friday was, but he remembered hearing her voice during the meeting earlier, so he figured that he could probably get a hold of her through the elevator speakers. He gave a fleeting thought to going back to the conference room and trying to reach her that way, but it seemed like an unnecessary move when he needed the elevator any way.
“Don’t wait up,” he called to the two watching him as the elevator doors closed on their worried faces. He had a feeling this wasn’t going to be quick. ....

Now Bucky wondered if he probably should have brought Wilson after all. Definitely not Steve, but Wilson... maybe. The silence was starting to get awkward as it continued to stretch on for far too long. He watched as Stark and his guard seemed to exchange a silent conversation before she nodded at Stark and headed towards him.

Their eyes connected as she gave him a slight nod before passing him by and heading for the elevator, his head turning to look over his shoulder as he watched her leave with an arched brow.

Bucky slowly turned back to face Stark as they were left alone. Then tension in the room seemed to double with the guard’s departure. His eyes met Stark’s as he waited for the other man to decide what he wanted to do.

Tony shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from fidgeting as he returned Barnes’ look, not sure what he should do. He’d told the other man to come find him, but with everything that had happened so far that day he’d sort of forgotten about Barnes. And, truthfully, he hadn’t expected the ex-soldier to come find him so soon.

“She’s interesting,” stated Bucky into the silence.

“Hmm,” agreed Tony with a shrug, not really wanting to explain Kisa to him. Besides, Barnes was in the room when he’d met King Odin, so he was sure he’d heard what the king had said to Kisa. Not to say that really explained anything for anyone interested in understanding.

“This way,” he said to him, suddenly making a decision and turning to lead Barnes to the back of the shop. Rhodey was going to have a fit when he found out what he was about to do, but it couldn’t be helped. Possibly Nat, too. They’d have to get over it though, because he wasn’t about to call someone down for this.

Tony didn’t need a babysitter.

He couldn’t hear Barnes’ following, feeling a need to turn and look, but from the tension at his back he figured he was. Quickly, he came to a stop by a chair much like the one he use to use when he still had the reactor in his chest. This one was hooked to the computer station beside it though and to the helmet he’d only just finished that morning that was currently sitting on the table in front of the computer screen.

“Sit there,” he told him with a nod towards the chair then moved to the helmet and computer and sat on the stool waiting there. He started to hook up the helmet to the computer and begin the program – that he hadn’t named yet- as he watched from the corner of his eye as Barnes gave both him and the chair a suspicious look before sitting cautiously down in the seat.

After another long silent moment passed while Tony continued to set up the equipment, Bucky decided to break his silence to ask the question that had been on his mind since King T’Challa had told him he was going to Stark.

“So, what exactly are we doing here?” he asked, following Stark with his eyes as he moved around him. So far the chair was reminding him too much of his time with HYDRA and he needed to think about something else.

Tony eyed him for a moment as he paused in what he was doing. They stared at one another for a tense moment before he slowly continued working, no longer looking at Barnes. “How much do
you know about the brain?"

“Not much,” he replied, face blank as he continued to watch him closely.

Tony glanced at him for a moment and nodded. “Keep it simple then, hm?” he asked, but didn’t really wait for a reply. “That’s fine. Alright. Memory is not stored in only one place in the brain, but actually in multiple places. The hippocampus, the amygdala, and the hypothalamus just to name a few. Within all of that there are basically two types of memory; short and long-term. What HYDRA screwed with in you was your long-term memory. Luckily, for you.”

Bucky frowned. “Why is that lucky?”

“Because, for a long time scientists have held the belief that long-term memory does not go away, that we don’t ever really forget what’s there it just becomes more difficult to access certain items over time. I’m also of that same belief. HYDRA fucked with your ability to access your long-term memory. Now that T’Challa’s people have stopped that from happening we’re going to get back your ability to access those memories.”

“And you really think that’s possible?”

“You remember Rogers don’t you?”

Bucky blinked. He made a valid point… “Better question; you really think you can fix what they did?”

Tony’s brows lifted as he gave Barnes a look. “Since you haven’t known me for very long I’m going to let that one pass.” He moved back over to the computer then, picked up the helmet and held it out. “Put that on.”

“What’s this for?” he asked, taking the helmet with a skeptical look.

“That is to get those neurotransmitters running again. They’ve been sitting dormant for too long, we need to give them a bit of a kick,” replied Tony as he began typing on the computer. “Don’t worry, you shouldn’t feel a thing.”

Bucky arched a brow.

“….Maybe a slight itch that will be more than slightly annoying because you can’t scratch it,” added Tony with a shrug at the look Barnes was giving him.

Bucky flexed his fingers, slowly opening and closing his hand from a fisted position in an effort not to fidget… or get up and leave. Part of him was interested to see if Stark’s invention would work on him, but another part of him wasn’t sure he wanted to know. What if there were things in his memory he didn’t want to remember?

What if remembering didn’t get rid of the Winter Soldier?

After all, that’s what this was all for, right? To bring back James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes and get rid of the Winter Soldier. To finally stop the assassin that had killed dozens for HYDRA. It was what everyone was hoping for, he knew, including himself. But Bucky also knew that there was no getting rid of the Soldier. He’d been the Winter Soldier for more years than he’d been James Barnes and he knew with a certainty that no matter what Stark did he could never really get rid of that part of him.

But he wasn’t going to stop them from trying. He needed them to try. Steve needed him to try.
Truthfully, he could think of no other way to get back what was taken from him. And if he were to be honest, he wanted to try.

Silently, he placed the helmet on his head; a little clumsily as he only had the one hand. As the quiet grew around them, he gingerly leaned back in his seat and stared at the blank screen before him. He was focusing so hard on not panicking that he didn’t even realize the itching that Stark had mentioned had started inside his head. Bucky closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When the dark haired woman popped into his head he almost physically flinched if not for his training. Instead he let loose a slight frown that had anyone been looking would have completely missed.

“Who’s that?”

Bucky’s eyes popped open at the unexpected question. He looked at Stark from the corner of his eye in question, but the other man wasn’t looking at him. He refocused his gaze to follow Stark’s then blinked at the image of the smiling woman with dark curls and blue eyes.

“How…?”

“The helmet projects what you see on the screen,” replied Tony, not missing a beat as he quickly understood what was being asked. “Who is she?”

Bucky stared at the screen, watching as the woman smiled at them before turning to ruffle the hair of a dark haired boy from behind. It played on the screen and in his head like some sort of home movie. Somewhere in the far back of his mind, somewhere far away from all the emotion that was currently coursing through his brain, he was impressed with what Stark had just done.

Tony had decided for himself that Barnes wasn’t going to answer his question. He decided not to take offense as he watched the pretty woman on the screen begin to make dinner. Barnes and he weren’t friends and he didn’t owe Tony any answers. And even though he was doing this favor for Barnes, it wasn’t the assassin who asked him to do it, so he had no obligation to feed Tony’s curiosity.

Tony mentally shrugged and was just looking back at the computer screen to check the effect his program was having on Barnes’ brain when the other man spoke.

“She… was my mother.”

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

“Nick.”

Fury eyed the man on the screen, silently, for a moment. More than eight years has passed since he’d last seen the other black man, yet he didn’t look any different from then. Even his tattoos didn’t look like they’ve faded a bit. Not that he was surprised, considering who he was talking, too.

And he was still fond of them shades, he saw.

“Brooks.” Fury watched the other man arch his brow, but continued on. “I need you to do something for me and I need you to keep it between us.”

“This isn’t official…” hissed out Brooks as he watched the other man. “What’s this about Old Man?”
“I do believe you still have a few years on me, Brooks,” replied Fury with an arched look of his own. “I need you to check something for me. I sent you an image to your phone. Find me anything and everything you can and as quickly as you can.”

“Does this have anything to do with the alert I received?”

“I’m not sure yet,” he answered with a frown. “Possibly. I have a few hunches. Also, have you heard of anything or anyone referred to as ‘the forgotten one’?”

Brooks crossed his massive arms then. “No. Should I have?”

“I don’t know,” shrugged Nick, refraining from rolling his eye. “I still don’t fully understand the world you live in, but I know you have access to things we wouldn’t even think of. And considering the source that came from… I’m willing to look anywhere.”

Both brows went up at that as Brooks regarded the other man. Something big was happening and for the first time it looked like Fury didn’t have all the cards. That couldn’t be good. “I’ll see what I can find. Give me three days.”

“Appreciate it,” Fury nodded. “Call me on my personal line when you have something. I’d rather this not get out until I know what I’m dealing with.”

That was interesting. Nick was only this cautious when someone close to him was in some kind of danger… And it must be pretty bad if Fury thought what he was looking for could be found in the supernatural world. That was the only reason he’d be contacting him.

“All right,” he breathed out with a slight nod. “You watch your back, Old Man. I’ll see you in three days.”

Fury gave him a questioning look then.

“I’ll find you,” he grinned, teeth pearly and sharp. “And then you’ll tell me whatever it is you’re not telling me.”

Fury did roll his eyes then. Fucking vampires. Well. Half vampire, anyway, but the sentiment remained. Even over a vid screen the brat could read him like an open book. That the other man even bothered was nice; meant he cared, but for Fury, as a spy… it was annoying as hell.

“Fine,” agreed Fury, knowing he really had no choice in the matter.

Brooks gave a chuckle from deep in his throat before he cut the call, already reaching for his phone.

Fury watched as the screen went blank, wondering to himself if his hunch was correct. They hadn’t been able to find any matches to the images on the robes of the men who came after Stark by checking conventional methods, so in his opinion that left only unconventional ones. While this having to do with something supernatural was a bit of a stretch to him, he knew they also had more information on things that weren’t of the norm than S.H.I.E.L.D currently had.

He hoped Brooks could get him something to go on, because the men they had in custody weren’t much help. While his interrogation methods got them scared enough to be talking… they weren’t speaking any language that he or anyone else at S.H.I.E.L.D recognized. And Thor wasn’t around right now for him to ask.

His train of thought was cut off suddenly as Agent Hill entered his office with a pad in hand.
“Agent?”

“Sir,” began Maria as she stopped before his desk with a knowing look on her face. “It would seem your hunch about Stark was right; a number of your record files have been accessed by an outside source. The fact we can’t trace the break in to Stark at all leads me to believe it’s him.”

“I see,” he nodded. He didn’t think Stark would waste any time once he couldn’t get Fury on the phone. “Anything else?”

“Yes, sir. I thought you should also be aware that it’s not only your known military records that have been accessed. A number of your records that do not exist have also been opened.”

“I figured they would be,” he replied as he folded his hands on the desk before him. “He’ll not find anything there.” He knew because the original files that hadn’t been redacted were only on hard copy and could only be found in a certain leader of the United States office.

“You don’t seem particularly worried, sir,” stated Hill with a curious look.

“That’s because I’m not worried, Agent Hill,” he agreed as he stood and came around his desk. “What Stark is after isn’t going to be found in my military record,” he said as he headed for the door, Hill following. “Keep watch, but don’t get in his way. Let’s see how creative Stark can be.”

“Sir, wouldn’t it be easier to just… I don’t know, talk to him?” she asked, hiding her frown behind a neutral mask.

“Sure, it would,” agreed Fury as he stopped and turned to look at her. “But where’s the fun in that?” He turned and continued walking then, calling back to her over his shoulder. “Besides, Stark likes to pull one over on me. Who am I to take that away from him?”

Maria stared after him with an incredulous look on her face. She blinked once. Twice. After another moment she slowly began to walk after him, shaking her head minutely. Sometimes, she wondered how anyone could think that Fury and Stark hated each other when to her it was more than obvious they enjoyed challenging one another way too much to ever hate each other. Just then, a flashback of the look on Fury’s face when Stark had successfully taken that nuke through the portal and saved Manhattan came to her and she couldn’t help giving a little smile.

No, she thought, Fury definitely did not hate Stark. If she had to guess… she’d say her boss was proud of the other man.

Shaking her head once more, Maria picked up her pace as she continued in the direction her boss took, silently thanking God that she was female and didn’t have interest in the games that men seemed to love to play.

~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~TA~

Bucky stared at the screen, unsure what to think. On the one hand he knew he was looking at his mother, while on the other hand he didn’t truly remember her as such. Not completely. He knew her as his mother as he knew the sky was blue, the Earth was round and life could be taken from anyone at any moment. It was just fact. And, apparently, she was in his head.

But he didn’t feel it. Not like he thought he should, anyway. Looking at her smiling blue eyes he didn’t feel any sense of happiness or warmth to know that’s where his own came from, nor any kind of sense of sadness knowing he has no idea what happened to her. All he felt was… lost. Had he been a good son to her? Did they have a good relationship? What was her name? Her favorite food? Favorite song?
Suddenly the image before him changed, drawing his full attention. Now she was dancing around her living room, a young boy of maybe five or six years with dark hair and her blue eyes – that was obviously him - standing on her feet and giggling as she held his hands and sung the song to him. It was obvious to see she had not only loved her son, but enjoyed his company as well.

And he couldn't fucking remember any of it.

And it made him so angry. It had been so long since he’d thought about everything HYDRA had taken from him to make him their weapon. It was easier not to think about it at first then somewhere along the line the choice was no longer his. It seemed like every time he’d stopped to try and think or remember it was harder and harder to do it until it came to a point where he was no longer trying at all. Then Steve showed up calling him “Bucky”. Now, he was sitting here watching his mother from his own memories and all he wanted was to hit something or someone. Really hard.

Quietly, he reached up and pulled the helmet off his head, watching as the image of himself and his mother faded away. He had a strong and irrational urge to throw the thing on the ground or against the wall to see it shatter, so, with care, he turned and placed the helmet gently on the desk.

Looking up, his eyes met Stark's. For a moment he’d almost forgotten the other man was there. He watched as Stark tilted his head as if to study him and tried not to break his gaze, instead returning his look.

Tony watched him, quietly. What he was looking for, he wasn’t sure. He could see the barely held anger in Barnes’ eyes… and wondered if he might be for the first time getting a glimpse of the man behind all the HYDRA bullshit.

“You have her eyes,” said Stark to break the silence as he looked away, not wanting to make the man feel like he was putting him on the spot. It wasn’t his best but the silence was starting to get awkward.

Barnes nodded, still watching him, but not saying anything as he had nothing to say. He knew he had his mother’s eyes.

“My mother never did anything like that with me,” he told him as he began unhooking the helmet from the computer. Jarvis had been the one to let him stand on his feet and spin around a room. “Was she teaching you to dance?”

Bucky blinked. “… I don’t know.”

“Hm,” nodded Tony. He then looked at him from the corner of his eyes as he asked, “So you don’t remember that at all?”

“That thing says I do,” he replied, darting his eyes to the helmet before returning to look at Stark.

“Right,” he nodded again. “But not what I meant. Did it help you remember that memory or did it pull the memory out for you? If it’s the first, great, but if it’s the second then I need to recalibrate the program before we do this again.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed as he glared at the engineer. If he had his way – and he usually did – there wasn’t going to be an ‘again’. He was done with this. Bucky squeezed his hand into a tight fist as he stood slowly from the chair. He stared angrily at the ground for a long moment before he darted his eyes around him then quietly began to walk away, back the way he came. Not looking at Stark once.
Tony stopped and watched the other man as he glared his floor into submission before quietly beginning to stalk away. He opened his mouth to call to the other man then, after a moment, thought better of it. He knew this couldn’t be easy for him and figured giving him some time to process couldn’t hurt anything.

“Barnes,” he called out and watched as the ex-soldier stopped, but didn’t turn before he continued. “You’re allowed to be angry, you know.”

Bucky turned to look at him then.

“I don’t have to be a genius to know that if anyone else here should be angry it’s you,” shrugged Tony. “Regardless of anything else I feel, I do know that.”

Tony watched as Barnes just stared at him for a moment when, suddenly, something shifted in Barnes’ eyes before he turned away and continued out. He watched him go as he thought about what he’d just seen and what it could possibly mean when, out of nowhere, U lowered a very dark looking smoothie in front of his face. He was sure he could smell a healthy dose of motor oil in there. Gingerly, he took the drink from the bot then tilted his head and gave said bot a significant look.

“Thank you, but I’m certain I remember banning you from the smoothie machine…”

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

It had been a couple of days and Steve was, once again, searching for Bucky. Ever since he’d come back from his first session with Tony he’d been quiet and distant – well, more quiet and distant than normal. Steve had tried to ask him how things had gone, but Bucky would just shake his head and say he didn’t want to talk about it, so he’d stopped asking. Now – probably to avoid him – Bucky had taken to staying in his room or disappearing to God knows where for hours. No matter where he looked he could never find him and FRIDAY still wasn’t talking to Steve for him to get any help from her.

He was sure that whatever was currently going on with Bucky had to do with his time with Tony, but neither one of them were speaking about it. Not that he’d asked Tony. But, now he was thinking he needed to rethink that decision because obviously something had happened and he needed to know what. When he asked Bucky when his next appointment with Tony was all he’d say is there wasn’t one and then walk away, not wanting to talk more about it. That was unacceptable. But Steve couldn’t help until he knew what the problem was.

“Deep thoughts?”

Steve blinked then turned at the sound of the unexpected voice. He gave a slight frown as he watched Sam make himself a cup of hot tea before turning to look at Steve, expectedly. Steve hadn’t even heard him enter the kitchen, much less walk pass him.

“How have you seen Bucky?”

Sam gave him a curious look before shaking his head. “Nope. He still dodging you?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “And I still don’t understand how he’s doing that without leaving the tower.”

Sam smirked and shrugged. He didn’t know how Barnes was getting pass and away from Steve either, but he wasn’t really surprised. One thing they did learn about the Winter Soldier was his mad ninja skills. What he didn’t understand was why Steve was so surprised that he could.
“Give him some time. He’ll talk to you when he wants to,” advised Sam as he took a sip from his tea. “You trying to push him is just going to make him clam up more – not to mention aggravate the hell out of him. I hear he hasn’t had another session with Tony either.”

“It’s true; he hasn’t. I asked him when his next session was and he told me there wasn’t going to be one,” he told him, pinching the bridge of his nose with obvious irritation. “I have no idea, though, if that was his idea or if he’d pissed off Tony.”

“Have you tried asking Tony about it?”

“No. I haven’t seen him and FRIDAY is still not speaking to me,” he replied with a sigh.

“Asked Tony what?” came a new voice from the doorway of the kitchen. Tony watched as Steve turned on his stool to look at him at the same time as Wilson looked up from his cup. Both of them staring at him with a surprised look on their faces. “And what was that about FRIDAY?”

“She’s not talking to him,” answered Sam with a grin as Steve turned to frown at him.

“Who? Rogers?” asked Tony who blinked at Sam’s nod. “Since when?”

“She hasn’t spoken to him at all since we returned home,” said Sam with a shrug. He thought the whole thing was hilarious… and that even Captain America could do with a slice of humble pie.

“Thank you, Sam,” said Steve with a glare at the grinning man. If you asked him, Sam was finding just a little too much humor in his pain.

“You didn’t know?” asked Sam to Tony as he took in the surprised look on his face.

“No idea,” he frowned. He’d had no clue his A.I. was silently protesting against Rogers. And if he felt no small sense of awe and appreciation for his creation along with his surprise… well, no one else had to know about that but him. “Is that what you wanted to ask me about? FRIDAY?”

Steve and Sam exchanged glances briefly before they both eyed the engineer, neither really knowing what to say. Sam, on the other hand, decided this was the perfect time for him to make a strategic retreat.

“Well, my coffee break is over,” began Sam with a nod to both men as he headed for the door. “Time for me to get back to work. I’ll see you guys later.”

Tony watched curiously as Wilson quickly left the kitchen, tea in hand, and not looking back even once.

“Wouldn’t it be called a tea break instead? And what job does he have that I don’t know about?” asked Tony aloud, to no one in particular. He turned to look back at Steve then.

“He doesn’t have a job,” said Steve with a frown towards the doorway that Sam had disappeared through. “He’s just a lousy best friend.”

Tony just hummed in reply as he watched him before moving towards the coffee machine. “Look, Rogers, I’m not sure what’s up with FRIDAY; I didn’t give her any kind of instructions like that. But if you want me to talk to her o--”

“No, leave her be,” cut in Steve quickly. “I understand why she’s doing it and it’s fine. She has every right. If she ever speaks to me again I’ll know I’ve earned it.”
Tony looked at him over his shoulder, studying him, before nodding and shrugging. If that’s what Rogers wanted it was fine with him. He didn’t have a clue what he would have said to FRIDAY anyway. Tony could successfully bullshit a lot of people, but - like JARVIS before her – FRIDAY has never been one of them.

“So what was it then?” he asked as he turned around once he’d finished getting his coffee ready for brewing.

“What?” asked Steve, feeling a little dazed. He was having a hard time keeping his head in the conversation, he was so shocked. This was the first time he’d been alone in a room with Tony in a while and even longer since they had a civil conversation. He didn’t know what to do. On one side he was happy for this opportunity, but on the other he was afraid he’d say something that would just make things worse between them.

“You said you wanted to ask me something,” clarified Tony, watching him closely. “I heard Wilson ask you if you’d ask me something and you told him you hadn’t seen me. Well, I’m here now; what did you want to ask me?”

Steve nodded as he eyed him, wondering if he really should be asking Tony about this. Was it really Tony’s place to tell him about Bucky’s session? Especially since it was obvious that Bucky didn’t want Steve to know?

“I wanted to ask you about Bucky,” he replied after a moment, deciding to try. But as he watched something close off in Tony’s eyes he immediately regretted the decision, wanting to take the question back. He opened his mouth to do just that when Tony began to speak.

“I see,” nodded Tony. Of course Steve wanted to talk to him about Barnes. What other reason could there be? He swallowed as he turned to grab his coffee, not wanting to look at Rogers anymore. “Well, go ahead. What is it you wanted to ask me about Barnes that you can’t just ask him yourself?”

Steve sighed. And just as he feared, he’d screwed up again. He wasn’t exactly sure how he did, but he was certain he had. “It’s nothing. Nevermind. You’re right, I should ask him.”

Tony turned back around at that, fresh cup of coffee in hand. He regarded Rogers silently for a moment before nodding and heading for the door. “If you say so,” he shrugged. It wasn’t his problem and Tony was sure he knew what he wanted to ask anyway. “But Rogers, if you want to know what happened with Barnes you should just ask him. And if he doesn’t want to talk wait until he does. I know, that’s strange coming from me; the king of pushing, but that also means I know when it’s best to just let people be.”

Steve blinked. Maybe Sam was right and he needed to just let Bucky be and wait. Apparently, Tony also thought so.

“Boss, the fabrication on the energy shield emitter for Rescue is complete and ready for testing,” said FRIDAY, suddenly.

“Thanks, Fry. I’m on my way down,” he replied a couple inches from the doorway where he’d stopped to speak with Rogers. “If you’re looking for Barnes, I believe he’s still on the roof.”

Steve eyes widened as he blinked. “Ah. Thanks.”

Tony nodded then quickly left the kitchen. He stepped on the elevator and his gaze caught Steve’s when he saw him stepping out of the kitchen and looking in his direction. He kept his face
completely blank until the doors closed and he finally released the breath he’d been holding, shutting his eyes.

“Are you alright, boss? Your heart rate is elevated,” said FRIDAY as she directed the elevator to take him to his workshop.

“I’m fine,” he told her. He took a few deep breaths and slowly released them, trying to calm his heart and stop his hands from shaking. He thought he had it under control, but he still couldn’t be alone in a room with Rogers without panicking. He needed to get a handle on it fast though, because it was only a matter of time before one of the others noticed. Nat was already giving him suspicious looks. If she figured him out it wouldn’t be long before both Rhodey and Bruce did. Things were going to go from bad to worse if that happened.

Tony wanted to avoid that at all cost, if at all possible.

He took a big swallow from his coffee when he was sure his hand wasn’t shaking too much and that the coffee wouldn’t choke him on its way down. Tony let out a breath to steady himself when the elevator doors opened on his workshop floor.

“Alright Fry, let’s play.”

***OOO***

*Upstate New York, The Xavier Institute*

“Hello Charles,” smiled the dark haired, blue eyed beauty on the screen. “I will not say this is a surprise, but it is good to see you. How have you been?”

“Lilandra,” he smiled in greeting. “I am well. I regret to say this is not a personal call.”

“I did not believe it was,” she replied. He watched her eyes flicker to the person he knew had recently entered to stand quietly behind him. “What can I do for you, my love?”

“Have you ever heard of the Infinity gems?”

Suddenly, she froze. For a moment he thought maybe his connection had been compromised, but he soon realized when she blinked that her reaction had nothing to do with the connection.

“What is this about, Charles?”

“You know I don’t believe in coincidences, Charles,” she began with a shrug. “There’s not really much I can tell you. The Infinity gems are a children’s tale that has been told here for years. It’s a story about six gems of immense power and if found and brought together there is nothing the person couldn’t do. It goes on to say that only someone worthy of the responsibility can truly master the gems. Anyone else would be consumed by their power. Just a tale to teach Shi’ar children about responsibility.”

Charles nods thoughtfully, but tilts his head in question when he sees a slight frown form over her face. “What is it?”

“You know I don’t believe in coincidences, Charles,” she began with a shrug. “There have been
rumors of late of a mad Titan searching for the gems and some stories say that he’s found one or two of them,” she tells him before a concerned look falls across her lovely face. “I don’t know how true any of this is, but you should know that the rumors also speak of a primitive planet that has somehow become of interest.”

Charles nodded as he thought about everything she just told him. Children’s story or not, what she just told him sounded just like what he was looking for.

“I am sorry I cannot tell you anything more, Charles. I never took the stories for truth, though I know of many here who do. If these gems are even remotely as powerful as the stories say, I must caution you to be very careful. Power like that should not ever belong to anyone.”

“I know.” Charles agreed with a nod. “Thank you, Lilandra. I appreciate the help.”

“You’re welcome, Charles,” she grinned and he watched her eyes flick to the person behind him once more before returning to him. “You know how to reach me if I can be of any more assistance.”

He nodded one last time before the screen went blank from her cutting the connection. He stared into the glass, his gaze falling on the slightly distorted reflection of his lover behind him.

“Would it really kill you to be just a little civil?”

Erik frowned as if he was really giving his answer some thought. “It might.”

Charles turned to regard him then. “You’re cute when you’re jealous.”

He crossed his arms as he met Charles’ stare. He didn’t like her and he wasn’t going to apologize for it. “I am not jealous, Charles,” he told him, fighting to keep a neutral expression. “I just don’t care for the way she looks at you.”

“And how does she look at me?”

“Like you’re still hers,” he admitted, knowing perfectly well how saying so contradicted his earlier denial and not caring.

“Well, I’m not,” replied Charles, his eyes softening as he watched the tension in those broad shoulders he loved so much lessen. “Come here.”

Erik rolled his eyes, but dropped his arms and did as he asked. Leaning down, he placed his hands on either armrest, stopping almost nose to nose with Charles. “I’m here.”

“Good. So am I.” Charles smiled as he brought his hands up to frame his face, looking into the bright blue-grey eyes he’s loved for so long. “You know she is not who I want, right?”

Erik stared into his eyes for a moment as if searching for the truth before nodding slowly, not wanting to dislodge his grip. “You loved her once,” he couldn’t help whispering.

“I did,” agreed Charles, rubbing a thumb over his cheekbone before leaning forward to close the remaining distance between them and kissed him gently on the mouth. “You know me, I would not have been with her otherwise,” he said as he pulled back to look him in the eyes and added, “I’ll fill you in on a little secret; I’ve loved you for even longer.”

Erik’s eyes widened slightly in surprise before he surged forward to take his lips in a fierce kiss. Tilting his head, he deepened the kiss as he lightly swept his tongue over Charles’ lower lip before
dive in as he willing let him in. He let the kiss carry on for a moment longer before he slowly pulled back.

His eyes locked on to Charles’ light blue gaze that was gently twinkling up at him, a small grin spreading across his face.

“Now, that’s settled,” began Charles, placing one last peck on his lover’s lips before sitting back in his chair, “tell me what’s bothering you.”

Erik blinked. Slowly he stood, but did not retreat from Charles’ personal space. “What?”

“Oh please, Erik,” now it was his turn to roll his eyes, “I’ve known you most my life, I’m well aware what you look like when you have something on your mind. I don’t even need my powers for that.”

“Fine,” replied Erik, conceding the point. Not like it wasn’t true, no matter how hard he tried to hide things from Charles the man always could read him. “It’s something she said,” he told him, nodding to the screen behind Charles in indication. “Whoever is after these gems it would appear they are not the only reason they are coming here.”

Charles nodded with a frown. He’d been thinking the same thing. “You think this may have something to do with the alien attack on Manhattan,” he more stated than asked. “I’ve been wondering the same; it is the only hostile alien attack that was from an unknown source that I’m aware of.”

Erik arched a brow.

“I said unknown,” replied Charles to his look, forcing himself not to roll his eyes as he couldn’t hide his grin. “What do you suppose we do about it?”

“Well, that – what was his name, Thor? – mentioned a brother, didn’t he?”

“He did,” nodded Charles, out right smiling now. He knew Erik had been paying more attention to the meeting than he’d let on. Seeing the glint in the other man’s eyes, Charles quickly shook his head and sighed. “How about we talk to Anthony first before we do… whatever it is you’re thinking, hm?”

Erik smirked then as he gave a shrug in answer. He figured he could give Charles a few days to talk to Stark; he was actually quite fond of the billionaire engineer and found him quite entertaining to talk metal with.

Charles gave him one last knowing look before turning his chair towards the door and heading out, Erik following closely behind. “You’re going to be bloody impossible for the next few days aren’t you?”

Erik chose not to reply as he grinned.

***OOO***

New York City, The Baxter Building

“Sue!”

Reed yelled as he continued to study the information before him. He still wasn’t sure he really believed what he was reading. The amount of power that these readings were indicating were
impossible… and the fact that there was a clear indication that there was a great possibility for that power to grow, exponentially. There had to be an error somewhere. There was just no way on Earth —

Right.

Not to mention, Tony would never send him incorrect math. That was probably even more impossible than these readings.

“You bellowed?” came a voice from the doorway.

Reed looked up at his wife’s smiling face and couldn’t help smiling in return. “Have you heard back from Norrin?”

“Nope,” she replied then turned and left, on her way back to finishing what she’d been in the middle of before she’d been so rudely interrupted.

She made it almost half way down the hall before she felt something wrap around her waist. Sue looked down and rolled her eyes at the sight of her husband’s arm before she sighed and allowed herself to be picked up and reeled in. A moment later found her glued to Reed’s side, his arm still around her waist and him still sitting where she’d left him.

Crossing her arms, she looked down at him with her eyebrows raised. “Were you not finished? I’m in the middle of something, Reed.”

“Okay, okay, just take a look at something for me, first,” he said, rubbing a soothing hand on her hip. “Stark sent me that data,” he added, nodding towards the screen.

She gave him a curious glance before following his nod to the screen. Now Sue didn’t have a science brain like her husband, but even she could see that what she was reading just wasn’t possible. She leaned forward and hit the scroll button to move down the page and blinked, nonplussed.

“This can’t be right,” she said, turning to her husband then. “The potential energy here… that just can’t be right.”

“I hate to say it, but we both know there’s no way Stark made a mistake and sent the data to us faulty. That is the energy reading of the Mind stone.”

“Reed, if this is right there is no way any of us can hope to control that kind of power,” she said, shaking her head. “And if all of those gems are even remotely close to this one in power… do you realize what that could do to the Earth if handled wrong?”

“I know,” he replied, nodding. He’d thought of that and he was pretty sure from what that guy Thor said that each of these gems in question held the same amount of cosmic power. “We can’t allow them to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Reed, no one should have that kind of power. It’s too dangerous.”

He nodded, agreeing with her but not really sure what he could say. They would need to talk with the others first. “Well, before anything else we have to first find them all.”

“Do you think they can be destroyed?”

“One thing at a time, sweetheart,” he rolled his eyes and sighed. And she told him he had a one-
track mind when he got an idea in his head.

“Right,” she frowned. “You think you can find the others?”

“With these readings? I’m sure of it,” he replied with a frown of his own, looking back at the screen. “That’s not the problem. The problem is making an instrument that can detect such power signatures.”

“I can see how that would be difficult.”

“Mmm, I may have to work with Stark on this one,” he admitted, grudgingly.

“I’m sure he’d love that, hun,” smiled Sue as she leaned down to press a kiss to his temple. When he turned to give her the stink eye she just pecked him on the lips and smiled again. “Now let go of me, I have things to do.”

“Bu-“

“Uh uh, try contacting Norrin again, if you need something to do,” she said as she patted his hand then removed it from her waist. “I have to finish this before Johnny gets back,” she called over her shoulder as she quickly left the room, putting any thought of the gems in the back of her mind.

“Fine,” sighed Reed, not that he really had a choice as she was already gone.

~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~~TA~

Steve entered his apartment with a long sigh. The last few days had been ridiculously busy and even though he didn’t really get tired much anymore since the serum (at least not without A LOT of action) right now he wanted nothing more than to sleep for the next week.

Between meetings with Fury, applying for a special clearance from the President to be allowed to go upstate to the new Avengers Facility, physical training with some of the others and doing his best to catch Bucky and avoid Tony… Steve was just plain exhausted.

Sighing once more he kicked off his sneakers by the door and pulled his shirt off over his head as he headed for the kitchen, intent on getting a bottle of water before jumping in the shower and making it an early night.

He came to a surprised stop, plans completely forgotten as he stared at the lone figure perched in the dark on his couch. Steve took another step forward, triggering the motion lights. Frowning he turned for the kitchen, not sure he wanted to deal with whatever it was that must be going on. Opening the fridge he grabbed a bottle of water, quickly popping the cap and guzzling the entire thing before tossing the bottle in the recycle bin before returning to the living area.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” he said, crossing his arms. “This mean you’re finish avoiding me?”

“Seems so,” shrugged Bucky, watching him closely.

Steve returned his gaze for a moment, studying him then nodded to himself and shrugged. “Alright,” he turned to head for his room and that shower he promised himself, deciding he really didn’t want to deal with anything now.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why?”
“Nope,” he replied over his shoulder as he continued walking away.

“Steve.”

Steve stopped then. Closing his eyes he took a deep breath before slowly releasing it and turning to look at his friend. “What, Buck?”

Bucky arched a brow at him.

“It took me a while, but I got the message. You don’t want to talk and I’m too tired to even think about trying to coax it out of you, so fine, don’t talk. I’m done chasing you all over this tower about it,” he said, using his discarded shirt to wipe the sweat from under his arms. “A piece of advice; if whatever happened got this kind of reaction out of you – where you chose to run away and hide from me and Tony – then maybe you need to continue whatever it is, because it’s the first true emotional reaction I’ve seen out of you since before Wakanda.”

He watched Bucky freeze, eyes wide in reaction to his words and held his gaze, wondering if he would take his advice.

“Since we’re handing out unsolicited advice, I have my own to give,” said Bucky, into the quiet that had grown between them. “You need to stop avoiding Stark and talk to him. I don’t know what’s going on there, but it’s obvious he means more than I first believed. The brat I knew never ran from his mistakes,” he said then after a moment added, “I think.”

They stared at one another again before a small grin slowly broke out on Steve’s face that quickly grew at seeing Bucky’s answering smirk.

“I will if you will,” threw out Steve on a whim, swallowing heavily. Part of him was hoping Bucky would deny the deal, unsure if he was capable of holding up his end … But, a larger, scarier part of him hoped he would.

After a moment Bucky nodded, slowly flexing his one good hand. “Deal.”

***OOO***

“Is this really necessary?” panted Tony as he dodged another kick from Natasha.

Nearly half an hour ago Natasha had come and dragged him out of his shop, saying that he needed to train with her and he’d needed to do it now. Apparently, over a week of no training was unacceptable to the short redhead and she was not taking no for an answer.

Not ten minutes later he was in sweat pants and a tank and getting his ass handed to him by the former assassin.

“Yes,” she answered as she dropped and swept his feet out from under him, popping back up in one fluid motion. “You need to train and since you refuse to ask Steve or Clint and Thor is gone, that leaves me.”

“What about Kisa?” he asked as he stood up, not noticing her grin that his reaction time had improved since the last time they’d sparred.

“She and T’Challa have agreed to help with your weapons training,” answered Natasha after delivering a series of kicks that he easily dodged. “You’re great in the suit, but there’ll be a time like a few days ago where you’ll be caught outside of it. Your hand to hand has gotten much better. Now, it’s time for more weapons.”
It would be really good if she could ask Steve for help with Tony’s training, but even though she knew Steve would agree, she also knew Tony wouldn’t. The question was why… but he wasn’t telling her. Since she couldn’t ask Steve or Clint she decided to ask Kisa and T’Challa. Both had agreed; which was good because both were proficient in a wider range of weapons than her.

Gradually, she began to move a little faster, bit by bit, throwing more punches and kicks. The next time she dropped to sweep his feet he saw it coming and lightly leaped into the air and back, both dodging the sweep and getting out of hitting range.

Natasha threw a punch, aiming for his head and grinned inward when Tony caught it and used her own momentum to flip her. She easily went with the motion, landing on her back and quickly bringing both her legs up, wrapping her ankles around his neck and easily flipping him down onto the mat. Natasha once again followed the motion and stopped in a kneeling position on his chest.

She grinned. “Good job, Tony. That was the first time you were able to successfully flip me.”

“Somehow, this doesn’t feel like a success,” said Tony with a slight shrug, unable to fully move his arms as they were both pinned beneath her knees. “Maybe it’s just me.”

“Well, I guess that depends on your definition of success,” she replied with a smirk.

“Winning. Winning, would be my definition of success.”

“Then you’re right,” she shrugged and stood, releasing him, “this isn’t a success.”

Tony quickly followed her up, hardly in any pain. “You do this so you can hit me without me telling on you, don’t you?”

Natasha arched a brow at him. “We’ll switch now; I’ll take the defensive you the offensive.”

“That’s not fair,” he whined as only he could do. “I never get to hit you this way.”

She smirked and quickly got into position. Tony rolled his eyes as he studied her stance for a moment before going in for the attack. He led off with a wide swing to her head, waiting for her to spin inward towards him to dodge the hit and easily catching the elbow aimed for his gut he knew was coming. Twisting her arm, he went to sweep her feet out from under her when she surprised him by suddenly jumping into the air and flipping backwards over their entwined arms, easily putting them in front of her.

“Now what, Tony?” she grinned.

Tony kicked out at her ankle in reply. Natasha easily dodged the hit, bringing a foot up to place on his knee and using it as leverage to push off and flip backwards, breaking the arm lock they’d been in. He quickly followed with a series of punches and kicks he’d learned from his Krav Maga training he’d once had with her, Rhodey and Steve.

Not realizing they’d gained an audience, they continued like this for nearly fifteen minutes until he’d finally landed a kick to her middle, causing Natasha to take a defensive step back, bringing their sparring to a halt.

“Your technique has improved greatly, sir,” spoke Vision from where he stood observing them. “I do believe you may be ready to incorporate more weapons into your fighting.”

They both turned, simultaneously, at the unexpected voice. Tony’s eyes widened when he saw not only Vision, but Bruce, Rhodey, Kisa and Barnes standing there, obviously having been there for a
“He’s right, Tony, you’re much better than the last time I watched you,” smiled Bruce. “Even the Hulk thinks so.”

“What style is that?” asked Bucky, quietly. He’d recognized some of the moves having been from both Judo and Aikido, but a lot of the hand attacks were too… aggressive to have come from either of those fighting styles.

“It’s called Krav Maga,” said Rhodey, turning to eye the ex-soldier. “It’s a mixed fighting style taught in most military branches.”

Bucky met his gaze, watching him silently for a moment before turning back to watch Stark and Romanov. “It was a good choice,” he said with a nod to Tony. “It’s a well-rounded style, utilizing both your upper and lower body. You have strength in both; I imagine in no part due to the Iron Man suit and working in your shop. It’s a good fighting style for you.”

Tony blinked. He wasn’t certain, but he didn’t think Barnes had ever said so many words to him in one go. No, scratch that, he was perfectly certain.

“It was Natasha’s idea.”

Bucky looked at her then, contemplating, before nodding. “You protect him,” he said to her, taking in her crossed arms and neutral face. He looked back at Stark then. “I’ll come find you tomorrow,” he told him before nodding then quietly turning and leaving the gym.

Silence fell in his wake as they all exchanged questioning looks.

“What did that mean?” asked Rhodey into the silence.

Tony tilted his head, still watching the doorway as he pressed his lips together, thinking to himself.

“Looks like he’s finally ready to remember.”
Chapter XIII

Chapter Notes

Okay, I have not finished editing this. I decided to post because I'm over a week late from when I wanted to, but I've been sick. Every time I sat down to edit I couldn't concentrate long enough to get anything done. Benadryl kicked my butt. A cold and allergies suck. My head feels like a giant cotton ball, but I'm happy to say it's coming to an end. I should be able to finish editing in a day or two. Death to allergies. So, please excuse any mistakes or hell, point them out for me. It'll make editing go faster.

_--_

UPDATE: Editing is finished. Let me know if you see something I missed. :)

Chapter XIII

Asgard

King Odin sat on the back of his favorite mount, Sleipnir, as he looked out over his beloved kingdom from the high mountain top. He could see his entire palace and much of the land and waters that surrounded it from where he sat. And he could also see the destruction.

The rebuilding was well on the way, but it would be a while before Asgard was back to it’s former glory. So much had happened in his absence and due to the oncoming threat punishing Loki for his deception would be an unwise move. They would need every abled body warrior should the threat come to Asgard. And as long as the Tessaract remained where it was Asgard was in danger.

But he could handle that. Now that he was awake he could keep Asgard protected; it was Midgard he worried about. It was his duty to protect Midgard as part of the Nine Realms, but also, due to their prolonged isolation, Midgard was not prepared for what was coming. Even with their recent encounter with the Chitauri and his son’s frequent visits, the majority of the people of Midgard did not truly understand that they were not alone in this universe. In fact, they have never been alone. Midgardians as a whole were much younger than Asgardians and there were races and worlds out there even older than Asgard.

Midgard would have to prepare itself quickly for the battle to come belonged to them. Odin could only do so much. This was a fight he could not protect them from… not without causing more damage for the people of Midgard. They didn’t realize it, but what was coming was as much for Midgard’s future as it was for the Infinity Stones.

From what he’d seen in his dreams the fate of Midgard was tied to the fate of the Stones. And what happened to Midgard would affect the rest of the Nine Realms. It would be a battle like none before it and The Avengers could not and would not face it alone. While it was up to the true protectors of Midgard to win this battle, he and his own would help where they could. There was no keeping Thor out of the battle as Midgard was as much his son’s as it was any of the people of Midgard though he did not know it and he would not dare try to keep him from it.

Thor had faced many trials – some no man should have to face so young – and he had become even stronger in both mind and body. He was slowly coming into his own, realizing his own
strength and power and he had people to protect on Midgard. Odin had no intentions of stopping his son from doing what he needed to do and, in fact, was very proud that Thor was so invested in Midgard’s future. When he became King of Asgard he would be known as a strong and compassionate King.

But before any of that could come to pass, they had to get Midgard through the coming battle.

And the first step to that was gathering the Stones. It could no longer be put off. Odin had hoped if he kept them secret and separated they would remain in obscurity for a while longer, perhaps a few more centuries. But when he’d heard a third stone had been located, he’d suspected their time in the shadows was coming to an end. Then with the awakening of the Mind Stone and Vision – something he’d even felt in the unnatural sleep Loki had placed upon him – he’d known there was no delaying the inevitable any longer.

They were going to need reinforcements, Odin knew, and luckily for Midgard they had more powerful allies than they were aware of. He would have to send out a message when he returned to the palace… and he hoped Anthony Stark was working on that clue he’d provided him.

Suddenly he was brought out of his thoughts when he saw Thor land with a heavy thud beside him on the mountain top. Both he and Sleipnir turned their heads to regard his son then.

“Greetings, Father,” said Thor as he simultaneously reached out a hand to pat Sleipnir’s large neck in a silent greeting to the mighty steed.

“Thor,” nodded Odin, looking down at his son. “Where is your brother? I hope he is leaving off with his tricks for a while. Now is not the time for his games.”

“He is at the palace,” replied Thor with a sigh. “I cannot say for certain that Loki has given up his trickster way, but I would not put much stock in him doing so. For now he is doing nothing to cause either of us concern, but I cannot say for how long that will last. I think he worries of your reaction to what he has done. You know he craves nothing more than your attention, Father.”

“And my throne,” added Odin with a nod. When Thor shot him a curious look he released a heavy sigh of his own. “You think me so old that I do not see that which stares me in the face? I love Loki as my own and always have; he is as much my son in my eyes as you are, but that does not mean I am blind to his ways any more than I am blind to yours. The seat of Asgard shall never be his.”

“I must admit, he did do a fair enough job as you that even I did not see his deception,” admitted Thor with a telling look for his father.

“Impersonating me does not make Loki a king, my son,” said Odin as he turned to look back out over his kingdom once more. “There is more to being a king then being able to copy one. Loki will never truly understand this because his desire for the throne is based solely in his desire for power. He cares not for the people or for Asgard.” No, he was not blind to who his son was. “Sometimes I wonder if his selfish and deceitful ways are a failure on my part as a father. Did I not provide him the love and care he required as a child? Is he right, did I show him no favoritism when he was growing?”

“I cannot speak for Loki, Father, but I have always felt your love and care,” answered Thor as he also turned to look at the view before them. “Perhaps we all, in some way, play a part in Loki’s feelings of inadequacy for he has also accused me of the same neglect. But one’s character, flaws and virtues, can only be laid at the feet of the parents for so long. For us all there inevitably comes a day where we must be held accountable for our own decisions, our own character. This is true
for brother as well.”

Odin turned then to give him a considering look. “I have said it before and I shall say it again, you will make a great king one day.”

“And I shall say again, not as great or wise as you.”

“No,’ said Odin with a knowing look, “you will be better.”

Thor turned and met his father’s gaze then. “Either way, not for a long time yet, yes?”

“The future is not writ in stone; even I cannot say with certainty what is in store for us.”

“That means whatever wrongs you have seen, Father, whatever has you troubled can still be changed.”

Odin nodded, in complete agreement. That was what he was counting on. “You know you must go and retrieve the stone we entrusted to The Collector,” he said to his son then, watching him nod. “When do you leave?”

“Soon,” he replied, knowing there was no time left to waste. “I must speak with the Warriors Three and Lady Sif first and will leave after.”

“Take Loki with you.”

Thor gave him a questioning look.

“Your brother needs to feel useful in all of this,” explained Odin, with a pensive look. He knew Loki was feeling guilty though he wasn’t entirely sure as to all the reasons why, but he knew it was best to keep his younger son occupied or he would be liable to do something… unwise to assuage his guilt. No one wanted that. “And who knows, perhaps his presence will be of use to you.”

Thor hid his skepticism behind a thoughtful look. His brother would make himself useful if only it benefited himself in some way, that much Thor knew, but he would not argue with his father about it and the king did have a point; Loki’s feelings of guilt may prove useful yet.

“Aye, Father,” he nodded with a slight bow of his head. “It is good to have you returned. We have not had talks like this in too long... mayhaps, that should have been my first clue.”

Odin gave his son a small smile. He knew Thor was still feeling both angry and guilty that he’d been taken in by his brother, but Odin knew it was no failing on Thor’s part that Loki’s trickery had worked. Loki was that good. And he’d had some strong help – another issue Odin would deal with in due time.

“Be careful, my son, I fear there are even more of us in search of the Stones than we realize.”

Thor nodded, accepting the warning for what it was before he spun Mjolnir and lifted her towards the sky, quickly shooting himself up and away.

Odin sat there for a moment longer, watching his son fly away before finally turning away and directing Sleipnir quickly back down the mountain and back towards the palace.

*oOo*

Sanctum Sanctorum, New York
“What outside that window has you so riveted?”

Stephen blinked and froze for a moment then turned to look behind him in the direction of the unexpected voice. He stared at Wong in confusion.

Wong stared silently back.


“You’ve been staring out that window for almost an hour,” said the bald man with a quirked brow.

“Hmm,” nodded Stephen as he turned back to the window. “I heard from Stark a couple of days ago. It would seem some of the things I have been seeing are not as out of place as we thought. Someone is searching for the Infinity Stones and whoever they are they’re coming here.”

“Again, you are not a Seer,” stated Wong, for what he felt like the thousandth time.

Stephen rolled his eyes as he turned around to face Wong once more. “Thank you, again, for your remarkable skills in observation.” Wong just stared back at him, completely unfazed by his words. “I am well aware of what I can and can’t do. Obviously, someone was giving me those visions. Question is, why.”

“Perhaps they want you to help find the Stones?” suggested Wong.

“No, I don’t believe that’s why…” he replied, thoughtfully. After Stark had told him the names of each of the Stones it had taken him a few hours to realize it, but he was fairly certain one of the Stones was already in his possession. “It’s something else.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Call it a hunch,” he replied with a smirk, feeling it not wise to speak of what he suspected yet to anyone else. He trusted Wong with his life, but instinct was telling him to keep his suspicions about the whereabouts of the Time Stone to himself. At least until he had confirmed it. “There’s another thing I haven’t mentioned.”

“And?” said Wong after a moment passed without him continuing.

“I have a heavy suspicion that whoever is coming here is connected to that attack on Manhattan a few years ago.”

Wong narrowed his eyes at him for a long quiet moment before suddenly throwing his hands in the air and turning quickly for the door, stalking from the room as he called over his shoulder in exasperation at him. “Well, that’s just great. Because, of course, I haven’t had my fill of aliens for one lifetime.”

Strange arched an eyebrow as he watched the Asian man storm out – well, as much as someone like Wong would ever storm from a room anyway. Strange blinked. “He took that rather well, I think,” he muttered to himself, actually thinking Wong took the news much better than he’d been anticipating. He moved forward to follow behind his friend and former teacher, but came to a stop when he felt his foot connect with something solid. Looking down he frowned when he saw a book he didn’t immediately recognize.

Bending over, Stephen retrieved the book from the floor as he took in the familiar image on the
cover. It was the exact same design as the large round window on the roof of his home. He wondered if it was possible Wong might have dropped it in his haste to leave, but was skeptical as the book was rather thick and much larger than your average book. They both would have noticed if he’d have dropped a book like that one. It could have been the house, he thought, but he quickly dismissed that as he was sure he was well acquainted with all the books within the Sanctum.

“Where did you come from?” he muttered allowed as he read the title written on the green, hardback cover. *The Book of The Vishanti.* “And who are The Vishanti?”

No sooner then he’d spoken the words aloud, Stephen froze feeling the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. Suddenly, he was quite certain he was no longer alone in the room. Turning around slowly, book still in his hands, Dr. Stephen Strange stared wide eyed as he saw before him not one, but three heads floating in mid-air in his study.

No bodies… Just heads. Three of them.

Now, he’d seen everything.

Stephen blinked. “What?”

The green female head in the middle was the one to speak first. Did he mention she was green?

“We are the Vishanti,” spoke the female in a lilting voice that was almost musical. “And you, Dr. Stephen Strange, have been chosen.”

*oOo*

*Stark Tower, New York*

Scott Lang sat anxiously in one of the visitor chairs in the lobby of Stark Tower, leg bouncing uncontrollably as he waited for his ex-wife to show up with his daughter. They were almost ten minutes late and he was starting to wonder if maybe Maggie had changed her mind about bringing Cassie to see him and just hadn’t called to tell him yet seeing as Maggie was never late for anything. His ex-wife took pride in being on time for everything, even just grocery shopping. If she was late it was a good chance she wasn’t coming.

But he just couldn’t talk himself into getting up and going back upstairs. Unless she called him to say otherwise... he was going to continue to sit there and wait for his daughter. At least for a little while longer. He just couldn’t give up yet. It had been over ten months, nearly a year, since he’d last been able to hold his little girl. Not since a few days before he’d joined up with Falcon and Captain America.

He’d spoken to her several times on the phone and over video, but this was the first time Maggie was allowing Cassie to come see him. Before now every time he’d asked Maggie if she could bring Cassie over she had said no, stating she wasn’t comfortable with her daughter being around so many criminals – even if they were also superheroes. It wasn’t until after he’d told her that Hawkeye’s wife and kids were also staying at the Tower that she’d relented; after speaking with Laura, of course.

Scott had no idea what Laura had said to his ex-wife, but it was apparently enough because the next thing he’d known she was agreeing to bring Cassie to the Tower for a few hours that Saturday.
And Scott couldn’t be more grateful. All he’d wanted since he was told by King T’Challa in Wakanda that he could go home was to see his daughter. He’d missed her so much and the separation from her had been almost unbearable. It was worse than prison. At least there he’d been able to talk and write to her.

Seriously, just the separation from his daughter alone was enough to make him think that if he had this all to do over again, he didn’t think he would be following Cap a second time. He couldn’t say he’d have chosen to sign the Accords either, but he was sure he wouldn’t make the choice that would take him away from his daughter a second time.

After another ten minutes passed with no sign of his daughter and his phone remaining silent he sighed to himself, dejected. He figured he had no choice, but to accept defeat or remain sitting in his visitor’s seat looking like the little lost lamb that the concerned looks from the security guard were beginning to make him feel like.

Standing up, Scott sighed once more as he turned towards the back elevators that lead to Stark’s personal floors, shoulders sagging and feet heavy. Obviously, his ex-wife had changed her mind. He wanted to be angry, but all he really felt was hurt.

He’d really been looking forward to seeing his Peanut.

Deciding he’d give Maggie a call later to find out what happened – after he’d gained sufficient control of himself that he wouldn’t cry in front of her – he took a step towards the elevators when he heard high-pitch squeal that could break glass.

Scott quickly turned, eyes widening in surprised delight. He’d know that sound anywhere.

“Peanut!”

“Daddy!!” screamed Cassie as she came barreling into her father’s out-stretched arms as he knelt to catch her in a hug.

Scott grinned from ear to ear as he scooped his daughter up and spun her around, holding her tightly to him. She was nine now and getting bigger, he noticed as her feet dangled and fell pass his knees. Soon he wouldn’t be able to carry her like that anymore… even sooner she won’t want him too. For a moment the thought saddened him; because of his choices he’d missed so much of her growing up. And he had no one to blame but himself. Even this latest stunt with Cap and the others… while he could add or put the blame on others, it was just one decision out of dozens. And, truthfully, no one else was responsible for his decisions, but him. He may have made the choice for Cap, but he made the choice.

“Hello Scott,” said Maggie in greeting as she finally caught up and joined them. She watched as both father and daughter turned to her in unison, identical looks on their closely held faces. She had to consciously stop herself from rolling her eyes; there was no denying who her daughter’s father was, that was for sure. “I’m sorry we’re late. We had a bit of a slow start this morning. Someone was determined to wear her purple princess dress to visit her father.”

Scott looked down at the nine year old, eyeing the dark blue jeans and purple top with a pink princess crown on it, before giving his ex a questioning look.

Maggie rolled her eyes at their identical frowns, each for a different reason though. “Of course, I didn’t allow her to wear that out in public. Besides, it needs to be washed; she wears it practically every other day. She puts it on after she gets out of school constantly. It needed a break,” she added to her daughter, meeting her big brown eyes before looking at Scott and meeting his. “The
shirt she’s wearing was our compromise.”

“I’d rather the dress,” said Cassie, pouting just a bit as she looked between her parents for a moment before settling on her father.

“Next time, Peanut,” smiled Scott as he tried not to laugh at his daughter’s put upon look. She was way too young to be able to make a face like that and mean it. “I’m sure your mother will let you wear your dress to come see me on your next visit. Regardless of what you’re wearing though, you know you are always daddy’s princess, right?”

Cassie nodded as she side-eyed her mother at the same time, seeing her mother’s nod in agreement. “Doesn’t hurt to look like one though.”

Scott smiled as he silently laughed, exchanging an amused look with Maggie.

“Did you want to come up for a bit, Mags? Meet the others?” he asked as he pointed a thumb over his shoulder towards the elevators.

“No,” she shook her head, declining the invite. “Maybe next time. I have to get back. I’ll be back to pick her up around seven. Meet here again?”

“That’s fine,” nodded Scott as he noted the time. It was almost half after ten now; that gave him practically a whole day to spend with his daughter.

“Alright. I’ll call you when I’m close so you don’t have to come down too soon and wait,” said Maggie before she moved closer to hug and kiss her daughter goodbye. “Okay, honey, I have to go now, but I’ll be back to pick you up later. Have fun with your father.”

Cassie nodded as she returned her mom’s hug and kiss. “Bye mama.”

“Thank you again, Maggie,” said Scott, sincerely.

Maggie paused and gave him a genuine, heart-felt smile then. She’d seen the sad look on his face when she and Cassie had entered the Tower unseen by him and knew he’d been worried that she’d gone back on her promise. “You’re welcome, Scott,” she told him, giving him a nod in acknowledgement of how she’d unintentionally hurt him. “You two have fun and I’ll see you later.”

Both Scott and Cassie watched her exit the building – he catching the knowing smile on the guard’s face – before he smiled at his daughter and turned to head for the elevators. “Well, you ready to go up, Peanut?”

Cassie nodded enthusiastically. She was so excited, having been waiting for this day for what seemed like forever. “Mhmm. I want to meet Captain America, Daddy. And will I get to see Uncle Tony? Is he home?”

Scott was nodding as they entered the elevator, not surprised that his daughter was a fan of Cap, when he froze as the rest of her words finally registered.

*Uncle Tony?*

He dazedly hit the button for the communal floor as he gave his daughter a look. Surprised and confused. “… *Uncle Tony?*”
Steve took a deep breath then knocked on the door. It was long overdue what he was about to do, but he still felt it needed to be done and there was no use putting it off any longer. He’d apologized to Clint for calling him already, but he knew there was someone else he also owed an apology. His actions had hurt an entire family and he needed to let them know that hurting them had never been his intentions.

Laura tilted her head, curious when she opened the door and saw Steve standing there.

“Hello Steve,” she smiled. “If you’re searching for Clint, he’s not here. He’s somewhere with the kids.”

“Hi, Laura. No, I uhh,” he rubbed the back of his neck, a little nervous. “Can I come in? I’m actually here to see you.”

Laura tilted her head, curiously, taking in his body language before silently stepping back and opening the door wider in invitation.

“Thanks,” he nodded as he stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He flicked his eyes around him, quickly taking in the interior design. This was his first time inside the Barton suites and he was slightly surprised to note that not only was the apartment larger than his own, but also laid out differently. He’d assumed all the apartments looked pretty much the same after seeing that Natasha’s looked the same as his own aside from the colors of the walls and furniture.

Laura watched him look around for a moment before turning to enter the kitchen. She went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of milk for Nate, sitting it on the counter before turning to see Steve standing awkwardly in the doorway. She had a feeling she knew why he’d come and, even though she felt it was unnecessary, she wasn’t surprised to see him. She’d been expecting him for a while now.

“Sit down, Steve,” she told him, not missing his nervousness as she took a seat at the table across from him. “And maybe relax a little? You’re always welcome here.”

Steve nodded and did as she said, taking a deep breath before he looked up at her, meeting her gaze. His eyes flickered to the baby bottle on the counter for a moment as he asked, “Are you…?”

Laura followed his gaze then shook her head before she looked back at him. “Oh. No, not yet. We have about half an hour before he wakes up. We’re good,” she grinned as she flicked her eyes to the clock to confirm. “What’s on your mind, Steve?”

“I wanted to see you to apologize,” he said, looking her in the eyes. “I umm, I know now my calling Clint for help was wrong. I know I shouldn’t have called and I’m sorry for the hurt it caused you and your family. I never meant for that to happen.”

“Thank you for that, Steve. I imagine that wasn’t easy to say,” she said, studying him with gentle eyes. “You take on the responsibility for others a lot, don’t you? But you should know that what’s going on between Clint and I is not your fault. This has been a long time coming for us.”

“It’s just… I feel like if I hadn’t called…” said Steve, rubbing a hand through his hair as he looked down at the table. “If I hadn’t called Clint wouldn’t have left and you guys… I don’t know. I just feel like it’s my fault that Clint isn’t with his family.”
“It’s not,” she told him, firmly. When he looked up at her, guilt shining in his blue eyes her heart broke for him. She could see that this was really eating at him and the psychologist in her just couldn’t let it continue. “Steve, I love Clint. I’ve loved him for years. And loving him means I know exactly who my husband is. If it wasn’t a call from you it would have been something else. Clint has a need to protect; he can’t not do it when it’s asked of him. His mistake was thinking he could just quit and walk away from all that, from the Avengers. That’s why I’m angry with him. Because in doing that he made promises to our kids that he couldn’t keep. And I’m tired of seeing that pain in their eyes, seeing him break their hearts one more time.”

“So… you’re not mad that I called him for help?” he asked, needing to clarify, because Clint had made it seem like the problems in his marriage were because of Steve.

“No, I’m not,” she said with a shake of her head. “Am I mad that in helping you Clint made himself a fugitive to the point he couldn’t come home for ten months? Yes. But, I’m not mad that you called him. Clint should have never quit and he should have never made all those promises to our kids.”

“Clint quit because he wanted to be home with you and the kids. He didn’t want to risk his life going on missions anymore.”

“No, Clint quit out of guilt over Pietro,” she told him, shaking her head. “Every time he had a mission go bad, Clint would come home talking about hanging up the bow and staying home, but he never did it. Not even after that business with Loki and that hit him really hard.” She knew because something inside her husband died after that. With all the deaths of co-workers he caused and the death of Phil Coulson… he still couldn’t talk to her about it all and, to this day, still had nightmares about it all. “He still can’t talk to me about all of it, but even after all that he didn’t quit and I knew then he never would. And I’m okay with that. The kids and I don’t need extravagant promises, we don’t need for him to be anything other than who he is and some of his time and attention. But when he makes promises to them and then turns around and breaks them it makes them feel like he doesn’t care, like they’re not as important to him as his job and that hurts them. I’m not going to stand by and watch him lose his children because he’s being an idiot.”

Laura sighed then as she sat back in her seat with a long pause. “Clint will never walk away from this world, Steve, I know that and I would never ask him to. It was a mistake for him to think he could. It’s not what I or the children want or need. They don’t need fancy trips; all they need is him, to know they matter to him. It had to stop.”

Steve nodded. He could understand what Laura was saying; Bucky’s father use to bring his kids gifts and promise to take them on trips to make up for him working a lot. And he knew for a fact that Bucky had never been out of New York prior to enlisting. “I still feel bad. If I hadn’t called…”

“I know you do, Steve, but it’s really not your fault,” she shrugged. “If not you, it would have been something else. I appreciate you feeling the need to take responsibility, but not everything is your fault.”

“Tell everyone else that,” frowned Steve, because it sure felt like everyone was blaming him for everything.

Laura frowned at that. “I won’t pretend like I know everything that’s been happening around here or everything that happened ten months ago. What I do know is that everyone on that team of yours is an adult and as an adult they are responsible for their own decisions and actions,” she said giving him a significant look. “And I know for a fact that neither Natasha nor Tony blames you for everything.”
Steve looked at her sharply then. “He told you that?” When she nodded he frowned. “Why would he tell you that? I mean, no offense, but Tony isn’t really the sharing type when it comes to his feelings and I thought he’d just met you when we all did.”

“You’re right; he’s not and we did,” she confirmed with a nod. “I’m a psychologist, Steve. Tony’s a client as well as a friend. I can’t tell you what we’ve talked about when he spoke to me as a client, but I can tell you that as his friend I do know he doesn’t blame you for everything. He knows he made a lot of mistakes with you and the rest.” Suddenly, she smiled then gave a little laugh as she shook her head, having remembered something. “He also came to me apologizing. And since you know Tony you can imagine how well that went. By the time he’d stopped talking I wasn’t sure if Clint was in jail, dead or in Wakanda. And all I did know was that Natasha was alive, everything had gone wrong, my kids were alright, Tony was sorry for everything and it was my mission to provide him with some much needed therapy. Next thing I know he was moving us off the farm and bringing us here. It wasn’t until a couple of weeks later when some government guys tried to get at the kids in their school and in here to talk to me that I understood why.”

“That sounds like, Tony,” nodded Steve, sharing a knowing smile with her. “Always a step or two ahead of everyone else.”

She gave him a look then, tilting her head as she watched him. “Exactly. Since you obviously know that… maybe you should tell him the real reason you didn’t tell him about his parents.”

“So he told you about that, too,” sighed Steve, looking away from her.

“Kind of hard to keep it a secret with the media telling everyone who’d bother to turn on a TV or read the news that your best friend killed his parents. I’m sure you can guess how well the press ate that up and twisted it all around, but it doesn’t take a genius to wonder if you had known something about that, especially with how well Tony evaded those questions about you from the press.”

Steve frowned at that. He wished he could have been there for Tony when he was going through all that, but he also knew it was his own fault that he wasn’t. Not to mention, it was his fault that Tony had to go through that, so he doubted he would have wanted Steve around if he could have been there.

“What makes you think I haven’t told him?”

“For one, he’s my friend and we talk, as strange as that may be,” she said with an arched look. “And for another, I’ve read some of the stories about you, the history books. And while I have a rule not to believe half the things I read in history books, especially anything dealing with the military and/or government, I imagine what little of your early life they had is probably true. There were also a lot of testimonials from people who knew you and they all said how close you and Bucky were, that you two were like brothers. He was your only family for a long time. That means something and you don’t strike me as someone who’d standby and let their family be persecuted for something they didn’t do. Clint told me how Natasha had been helping you search for him. I don’t imagine having to tell one friend that someone who is family to you is responsible for something that hurt them is easy to do and considering how much you seem to like taking responsibility for what others do, you probably felt responsible for that, too. Despite the fact you were lost beneath the sea and thought long dead by the time any of that happened.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not responsible.”

“Something tells me your feelings of guilt are not the reason you didn’t tell him.” He looked at her then, his face unreadable. “Whatever your reason you should tell him. I know you care about him,
Steve. I see the way you look at him when you’re sure he can’t see, so it’s not because you don’t care about him.”

“Of course, I care about him,” said Steve, his back stiffening. “Does he think I don’t care?”

“What do you think?” she asked softly, giving him a sad look. “Like you said earlier, Tony isn’t the type of person to open up to people easily, if at all. There’s a reason for that. And, sadly, you’ve become part of that reason and you’re the only one who can change that.”

“How?” he asked with a swallow, more than a hint of desperation in his voice.

“You sure you want to know?” she asked, seriously. She watched him hesitate before giving her a decisive nod. She studied him silently for a moment longer before answering. “Be honest with him. No matter how you think he’ll react to hearing the truth, tell him. No half-truths and excuses. Just tell him the truth, whatever he wants to know. If he asks, then trust that he can handle whatever it is you have to say. He doesn’t need or want you to protect him from the truth. Secondly, figure out what it is you feel for him and show him.” She held up a hand to stop him when he opened his mouth to respond. She had a feeling what he was going to say and didn’t want to hear the denial. “I’m not accusing you of anything, Steve, but I do have eyes, like I said before and I know you’re not as oblivious as you pretend. Acknowledging something to yourself doesn’t actually mean you want to do something about it and if you decide that you don’t that’s okay. Either way you will have to make that decision for yourself.”

After a moment he nodded, silently letting her know he understood.

“Just be honest with him, Steve,” she sighed, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “It’s not going to be easy. Rebuilding trust is hard and it’s going to hurt like hell for the both of you. It may take a long time and sometimes it’s going to feel like you’re not making any progress and you’re both going to wonder why you’re even bothering. In the end you may not ever get back what you once had, but I promise if you stick with it and don’t give up it will pay off. But you need to be sure that this is the road you want to take and just what it is you want from him. If you get him to open up and let him down again… I don’t think you’ll be able to come back from that.”

“What if I decide I don’t want… a uh…”

“…a relationship?” she suggested after he paused for too long.

“Yeah,” he swallowed, “that. What if I decide I don’t and change my mind later?”

“That’s fine, Steve. People change their minds about relationships every day. Right now, just focus on rebuilding your friendship and the trust between you two. Anything more can wait.”

“Do you really think we can be friends again? Rebuild trust like you said?”

“Of course,” she nodded, squeezing his hand once more before letting go. “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I didn’t think you can. Will it be like it was before? Probably not. Despite how the saying goes, people don’t ever really forget when they’ve been hurt. But being like before is probably not what you want, because obviously something was broken between you two for you to have ended up here. Matter fact, I’d say there was something broken with the entire group. Maybe this time around you will build something better for all of you.”

“Maybe,” he nodded thoughtfully, thinking over what she’d said.

“Well, from what I can tell you guys are already off to a better start,” she shrugged. “This time you’re all here because you chose to be not because Nick threw you all together out of necessity.
You all know you can work together when you need too, let’s see how well you do when you actually want to be together. Of course, that’s assuming you all want to be here.”

“Right,” he agreed, this time they were both on the same page. “I’ve been working on that with Fury. Soon everyone will have a choice if they want to spend the rest of their probation time here in the Tower or relocate to the new Avengers Facility upstate.”

Laura blinked at that. “Wow.”

She wondered what Clint would decide. She knew he wanted to work on their relationship and spend time with the kids, but she also was aware that being here with the others was causing him all kinds of stress. Especially since Natasha still refused to speak to him outside of meetings. Whatever he decided, she wasn’t moving the kids again. The next time they moved they were going home; be it back to the farm or some new home, but she and the kids were not moving to the Avengers Facility.

“Yeah,” he nodded. Steve already knew he’d be staying at the Tower, but would let the others decide for themselves and after their probation was up they’d all be free to go wherever they wanted. He couldn’t help admitting, if only to himself, that he hoped they would all choose to stay and not only for the probation period. All of them were his family and he wanted them to stay together.

“Well,” he began, standing. “I should get going. Nate will be waking up soon and I don’t want to be in the way. Thank you for the talk, Laura, and the advice. I truly appreciate it.”

Laura smiled and followed him up. “You’re welcome, Steve. Whatever you decide good luck. You know where to find me if you ever want to talk again.

“Thank you,” he said with gratitude and smiled before turning and leaving the kitchen.

Laura listened for the front door closing before shaking her head with a sigh. “Those two, alone, could make a therapist very rich,” she muttered to herself aloud then tilted her head and smiled when she heard a cry coming from down the hall. “Coming baby,” she called as she headed in that direction, quickly pushing Clint, Steve, Tony and the rest of the Avengers to the back of her mind.

Tony grinned when the elevator doors opened and he heard girlish squealing coming from the living room area on the common floor. He’d been surprised when FRIDAY had told him Ms. Cassie was in the building and had asked for him, having no idea she was coming, but he’d been expecting her for a while now, sure she’d want to come see her father. Truthfully, he’d thought she’d have shown up sooner.

When he reached the living area he stopped in the doorway and waited as he took in the scene before him. Cooper was sitting on the couch beside his dad, talking animatedly about his archery class in school, while Nat sat on the other side of Cooper, seemingly listening to his every word. Rhodey and Sam were over by the large windows that looked out onto the balcony launch pad having a conversation, but also shooting knowing smiles and glances at Lila and Cassie. Wanda was sat reading in an arm chair, but apparently paying at least a little attention to the two girls he guessed from the slight grin on her face – since he doubted A Tale of Two Cities written in Russian was that amusing. He could see Viz and Peter in the kitchen putting together sandwiches when he glanced that way before he turned his attention back to the reason he was there.
Cassie was sat on the long couch pressed up to her dad’s side as she talked excitedly with Lila, who was sat close beside her. He tuned in to the conversation and grinned when he realized the two girls were talking about their resident god. Lila was telling Cassie about how huge Thor was and swearing that he had the “most prettiest” – Lila’s words – hair she’d ever seen on a guy and how Cassie would never believe it until she’d seen him. Cassie was turning back and forth between Lila and her dad, eyes wide, wanting him to confirm everything Lila was telling her, but not really giving him a chance to.

Tony rolled his eyes in amusement and vowed to himself to tell the big blond about this the moment he returned (and also to make sure Cassie met Thor – he had to see that happen) before clearing his voice, loudly. Right now, the attention needed to be on him, not Thor.

Cassie and Lila, along with everyone else, immediately looked in his direction when they heard the noise.

“What’s up, Stark,” said Clint, but he was drowned out by a high pitched scream. If he’d noticed the knowing smirks on both Rhode’s and Natasha’s faces he’d have known not to bother.

“Uncle Tony!” screamed Cassie, excitedly, as she immediately extracted herself from her dad’s arms – something she hadn’t done since she’d arrived and launched herself at her dad – and ran to the smiling engineer.

“Poppit,” exclaimed Tony as he stooped down to catch the nine year old in a hug. He grinned even bigger as he felt small arms wrap around his neck, securely. He saw all the curious looks they were getting over her shoulder from almost everyone, including Lang, but paid them no mind. Standing, he easily hefted the little girl up as she leaned back with a big smile on her face. “I wasn’t expecting to see you today, Poppit. How are you?”

“Really good,” she told him with a nod, eyes shining. “Mommy let me come visit daddy and she said if I’m good she’ll let me stay a whole weekend next time, maybe.”

“Well, then I think you should be very good for your dad, so you can come back and see me, too,” replied Tony with a very serious nod.

“I will, I promise,” nodded Cassie, just as serious.

“Good,” grinned Tony. “Now tell me about your science fair. How was it? I’m sorry I couldn’t come to see it, but I was really busy.”

“I know, it’s okay. Mommy said you couldn’t make it because you were keeping your promise to bring my daddy home,” she replied, not noticing the looks exchanged behind her as all her focus was on Tony. Tony saw and noticed though. “Mrs. Harris says that the fourth graders have a science fair too, so maybe you can come next year. And maybe you and daddy can help me next time, because you were right, everybody brought a volcano this time,” she added, her eyes widening dramatically. “So, I’m glad you help me pick something else.”

Tony laughed inwardly at the comical look on her face, still grinning. Sadly, he knew she wasn’t exaggerating as much as some might think. He’d looked up her school’s Third Grade Science Fair and there had been a large number of volcanoes. Cassie’s demonstration of how oil and water didn’t mix and why had earned top marks, he’d learned from Maggie.

“Sounds like a plan,” he agreed with a nod. “I’ll do my best not to miss the next one and maybe we can do something with robots,” he added, eyes wide and sparkling.
Cassie giggled knowing how much her Uncle Tony liked robots. “Uncle Tony, we can’t bring Dummy to my school, remember,” she told him with a long suffering sigh and a shake of her head. He’d tried to get her to bring Dummy this time, too.

“Oh no, of course not Dum-E,” he said waving his hand after he shuffled her to one side and settled her on his hip. “We’ll do something better than Dum-E, Poppit, something bigger that lights up maybe.”

“I’m only gonna be in the fourth grade, Uncle Tony,” laughed Cassie, turning to share a look with her dad before turning back to Tony; which was fine because all Scott did was stare.

Scott couldn’t believe his eyes. He’d never seen his little girl talk so much or be so affectionate with another adult that wasn’t him or her mother. His baby girl was shy. Where the heck did his shy little girl go?!

Tony flicked his eyes to Lang, taking in the dumbfounded look on his face before flicking his gaze around the room and noting the silent amusement on Natasha, Peter and Rhodey’s faces. Sam also looked like he was holding back a smile while Viz hummed appreciatively as he continued to make sandwiches.

Taking in the others only took a moment before his attention was back on Cassie. “So what are you saying? Too much?” he asked with wide eyes as she giggled again, not really sure what was appropriate for fourth grade. He’d skipped most of elementary. “You’re probably right,” he told her with a nod, a little disappointed though. “Well, no matter we’ll come up with something. There’s plenty of time.”

“Right,” smiled Cassie, nodding hard enough to cause her long pigtails to swing.

Tony grinned back, opening his mouth to speak when he was suddenly cut off.

“Well, who’s this?” asked a voice from behind Tony and Cassie, causing both man and child to turn their heads, simultaneously.

Tony and Cassie both stared at Steve, one with a child’s curiosity. Tony tried not to stiffen knowing Cassie would feel it and respond. He didn’t want to unintentionally color her opinion on Rogers as he was obviously good friends with her dad.

“Steve Rogers meet Cassie Lang,” said Tony, turning to look at the little girl and nodding his head towards the blond man before them. “Poppit meet Steve Rogers.”

Cassie stared at Steve for a moment, her smile now gone, replaced with an assessing look that was almost scary coming from one so young. “You’re Captain America?” she suddenly asked quietly.

Steve flicked his eyes to Tony for a second before nodding. “I am,” he answered as he watched her, having realized from the last name that the little girl must be Scott’s daughter. “Your dad talks about you a lot.”

Cassie smiled then as she rested her head on Tony’s shoulder. “Thank you for taking care of my daddy,” she said to him in the same quiet voice. “Uncle Tony said you would, but I wasn’t sure because Mommy was really mad. I’m glad he was right.”

Steve looked at Tony then. “Yeah, he tends to do that a lot,” he said, staring at the other man in wonder. When Cassie lifted her head to look at Tony too, he quickly turned his gaze back to the little girl. “And you’re very welcome.”
Cassie gave him another contemplative look then turned her head and silently tapped her Uncle Tony softly on the shoulder. Understanding her request, Tony bent over and placed her on her feet. She tightened her arms around his neck, giving him one last hug before she quickly went back to her dad and pressed up against his side and only then looking at Steve once more.

Tony and Steve both watched her go before they both noticed they were now the subject of many curious looks. Tony saw a few pair of eyes studying him with a suspicion he recognized all too well and knew it was a good time to make a hasty retreat.

“Well, I need to go into the office if anyone comes looking for me,” he said moving over towards the kitchen and grabbing a sandwich in each hand. “Thanks, Viz,” he said to the red faced android before turning and quickly heading for the elevator. “Kisa will be with me. I’ll see you guys later. Don’t wait up.”

Everyone watched as the elevator opened for him without him having to call out to FRIDAY or hit the button – not that he could as his hands were full – and then immediately closing behind him, effectively taking him out of their line of sight. They all exchanged curious looks in the suddenly quiet room.

“That did just happen, right?” spoke up Sam, still staring towards the elevator doors. “I didn’t just hallucinate that?”

“Stick around,” said Rhodey with a roll of his eyes, understanding exactly what the other flyer was talking about. “You’ll soon learn a lot of things you probably have assumed about him aren’t exactly right.”

“The soup and sandwiches are ready, if any of you are ready to eat,” spoke Vision suddenly, observing them all, but not commenting further.

The three kids were the first to move towards the kitchen, Cassie looking at her father before following Lila and Cooper. The adults all exchanged looks once more before they followed the kids, Rhodey being the first.

*oOo*

Tony sighed tiredly as he stepped off the elevator onto the communal floor. He’d spent longer than he’d initially planned in the office today. He’d planned to spend some time in his music room, but now it was after eleven at night and all he wanted was a cup of coffee and his bed. For once he was actually looking forward to sleeping and considering he needed to be up at five the next morning, he figured that was a good thing. Tony would have gone straight to his penthouse, but he’d put the better coffee maker on the common floor for everyone to have access to its heavenly powers. Not for the first time, he was regretting that bout of generosity.

Sighing again, he slowly shuffled his way towards the kitchen as he rubbed one hand over his left eye and reread the invitation in his hand with his right. The advertising department had out did themselves this year, he thought as he took in the gold embossed cream colored heavy cardstock. They were slightly late this year he noted as he took in the less-than-three-weeks-away date, but he figured the turn out would still be just as good as previous years. Probably even better once it was leaked that The Avengers would be attending – because if they agreed, it would definitely get leaked. It always did even though he had no idea how it happened.

Tony shook his head, wondering to himself just how big a fiasco the Ball might turn out to be and
suddenly glad for the security measures that would be put in place to keep out the inevitable party crashers.

“What’s that?”

Tony startled as he looked up at the unexpected question, finding a pajama-wearing-Steve in the doorway of the kitchen, cup of something that smelled like chocolate in hand. He gave the blond another once over and couldn’t help noting that Steve looked very inviting covered in sleep warmth and his hair all wild.

“What?” he said, blinking and pressing a hand to his chest, finally remembering Steve had asked something.

“I asked what’s that,” replied Steve, nodding to the card in Tony’s hands.

“Oh. This?” he lifted the card slightly in indication. “This is an invitation to Stark Industries’ Maria Stark Foundation Ball.” He grinned a little as he glanced back down at the invitation before looking at Steve to see him aiming a questioning look at him then shrugged and added, “Pep likes to keep me on my toes. She’s sent everyone an invite, actually.”

“And you’re alright with that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked, truly confused. He didn’t care that Pepper had invited the others to the event. He’d have asked them if they wanted to go if she hadn’t any way.

“No reason then, I guess,” replied Steve, watching him carefully.

“I’m not that petty, Rogers,” he said, finally catching on and frowning. “At least not often.”

Steve took a sip from his cocoa to hide his grin; though he was sure Tony caught it.

Tony narrowed his eyes at him, not missing the smirk. “Why are you up anyway?”

“Can’t sleep,” replied Steve with a shrug.

“So, I can see,” said Tony, taking in the look on his face now. Steve was obviously tired; it was written all over his face, but yet he couldn’t sleep? “Something on your mind?”

Steve gave a weird gesture that he assumed was supposed to be a nod, or shrug, or both as Tony eyed him speculatively. “Want to talk about it?”

Want to? No, Steve didn’t… but maybe he needed to. Besides, he’d made a deal and this could be his way of starting to hold up his end of it. Steve moved to sit down on the nearest couch seat and sighed. He could feel Tony’s eyes on him, but he didn’t look up. This was going to be hard enough to say as it was, he didn’t need to be staring at Tony while he did it.

“A while back you accused me of choosing Bucky over you and I need to explain why that was.” He could practically feel the tension growing in the air and it only took a glance to see Tony’s entire being had stiffened at his words. “I wasn’t choosing him over you, but I do see how it could appear that way. It was never my intention, but I am sorry you were hurt because of it.” He did look Tony in the eyes then, needing him to know that he truly meant it.

Tony stared into blue eyes and, not knowing what to say or do, just nodded. He knew Steve wasn’t finished and didn’t want to interrupt.
Seeing his nod and that he still had Tony’s attention, Steve continued. “You see, I chose Bucky, followed him because I knew. I’d always known and it was all my fault, so this time I had to protect him, save him. I couldn’t let it end wrong again.”

Tony blinked, not sure he was understanding him right. “Zemo framing Barnes wasn’t your fault, Rogers. You couldn’t have known that was going to happen.”

“I know,” replied Steve then shaking his head, “that’s not what I’m talking about. Though, now you mention it, that too is my fault. I’m the one who insisted on that information dump.”

Tony frowned, that hadn’t been his intention, but he wasn’t going to try to argue the point with Steve. He’d already given his point on that subject once before.

“What did you mean then?” he asked, still not understanding.

“I meant the war,” said Steve with a sigh. He could see from the look on Tony’s face that he still didn’t get it, so he knew he’d have to just come out and say it. “Everyone knows that I joined the war to save Bucky and the others who’d been captured. It’s in all the history books as my first mission. What the world doesn’t know is that it wasn’t my first mission, that it wasn’t a mission at all. Howard flew a plane into enemy territory and dropped me off. I went in alone.”

Tony’s mouth fell open as he stared in disbelief at Steve. Out of everything he was expecting to hear, that wasn’t one of them.

“Another thing no one knows – this one not even Army command knows – is that when I found Bucky he’d been separated from the rest and tied down. It was obvious that HYDRA had either been planning to do something to him or had already. When I asked Bucky he told me they hadn’t and I chose not to tell the brass how I had found him. But I knew,” said Steve, shaking his head and sighing.

“Knew what, Steve?” asked Tony in a low voice, afraid he knew what Steve was going to say.

“I knew he was lying,” replied Steve with a heavy swallow. “I’d known Bucky most my life by then; I knew what he looked like when he lied. And he’d lied right to my face… and I let him.” Steve looked down into his cooling cocoa, not wanting to see the look on Tony’s face as he told him this. “I just kept telling myself that if it was something especially bad that he would tell me and since he seemed fine and kept saying he was fine, then he must be fine. I knew I should have told someone, our commanding officer at least, but Bucky kept saying he was fine and other than him being a little more quiet and distant and a lot less flirty, I didn’t see anything wrong. I needed to believe he was okay.”

“But you knew,” whispered Tony, watching him.

“I knew,” nodded Steve, blinking away the tears as he took a deep breath. “Then the intel came in on the Red Skull and suddenly we were preparing for our most dangerous mission. There was no time to spare, we had to move fast or risk letting him get away. I wanted Bucky to stay behind, but he was not going for that and, unless I told Command what I suspected, they weren’t going to let him stay behind anyway. So he went on the mission, wanting to watch my back and then he fell and I didn’t catch him. I knew and I didn’t catch him.”

“Knew what, Steve?” asked Tony. “You couldn’t have known he would survive that fall.”

“That’s the thing, I could have. I should have. I knew HYDRA was experimenting, trying to recreate the serum and I knew they’d done something to him even though he wouldn’t tell me. I
should have made sure someone went to look for him.”

“Steve, you had no idea what they did or didn’t do to Barnes. There’s no way you could have
known he’d survived,” said Tony, shaking his head. “I know you like taking the blame for
everything when things don’t go right, but I think you’re reaching here.”

Steve turned to him then. He really wanted to believe that, but he knew better. He knew he should
never have let Bucky come on that mission… and because he did his best friend lost everything he
knew and was turned into a weapon that killed for the very people he’d almost died trying to stop.

“Maybe I am,” he said, not really believing that, but not wanting to argue the point with Tony.
That wasn’t why Steve was telling him this. “But now you know why I had to help him when he
was being framed. Everything he’d been through – becoming the Winter Soldier, all the people
he’s killed – it’s my fault. I couldn’t let him go down a second time. It was never about you. If it
had been…”

Steve trailed off, completely scared of what he’d almost said without thought. If it had been I’d
have made a different choice. He froze, heart rate rising as he tried to understand what he was
going to say. Was it true? Would he have made a different choice for Tony? Would he have
stayed? Steve swallowed as he flipped his eyes up to meet Tony’s.

Tony watched Steve closely as he waited for him to finish what he was saying, but nothing more
came. Tilting his head, he frowned when Steve eye’s met his; pupils a little dilated and breathing
kind of fast.

“Steve?”

Steve stood up quickly, almost dropping his now cold cocoa. “Nothing, it was nothing,” he said,
not looking at Tony and quickly heading for the stairs. “I’m gonna try to get a little more sleep. I
just wanted… just wanted you to know that.”

“You wanted me to know that you didn’t pick Barnes over me?” It wasn’t really a question.

Steve paused with the door to the stairs open, turning back to look at him then. He stared at Tony,
taking in his dark eyes and his dark, handsome looks that he hasn’t been able to get out of his head
for a while now. Maybe for a lot longer than even he realized… After another moment he turned
back towards the stairs, breaking their staring match.

“Yes,” he replied then quickly left down the steps, closing the door behind him.

Tony remained on the couch as he watched the door to the stairs gently close. He felt numb. He
wasn’t sure what had just happened… but, he was sure it was important. Later, he’d repeat the
entire conversation in his mind and see what sense he could pull from it, what meaning, but for
right now all he could think about was one thing.

What had Steve been about to say?

If it had been….. …. …. What? Me??

Was that what he was going to say? If it had been Tony? What would Steve had done if it had
been about Tony?

~oOo~
Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!